

READING DELIRIUM: WORRINGER, RILKE, BENN

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## READING DELIRIUM: WORRINGER, RILKE, BENN

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In this dissertation I approach “delirium” as an aesthetic and poetic discourse in early 20<sup>th</sup> century German literature. Through a series close readings of texts by Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) and Gottfried Benn (1886-1956), I argue that “delirium” emerges as a style of writing that strives to bring tactile immediacy to the poetic word. In this context, words are no longer merely symbols or signifiers, but rather poetic elements that act directly on the body of the writer and reader. As writers and readers pursue such words, they also pursue the loss of subjective and linguistic control that such words necessarily entail. It is this oscillation in language between conscious striving and the breakdown of consciousness that I describe as a delirious style.

In the Introduction, I explain my method of reading (I call it a phenomenology of verbal sensation) by tracing the genealogy of delirium as an aesthetic concept through the work of Michel Foucault (on “Unreason” and “the thought from outside”) and Gilles Deleuze (on “sensation” and the “clinical aesthetic”). I also situate delirium historically at the confluence of early 20<sup>th</sup> century discourses on vitalism, haptic vision and Expressionism, and point out the critical advantages of my methodological approach to the writers in question.

In Chapter 1, I read two poems—Rilke’s “Der Lesende” (1901) and Benn’s “Staatsbibliothek” (1925)—as the two poles between which delirious style oscillates. Chapter 2 connects Wilhelm Worringer’s art-historical work on expression and non-

organic life to the aesthetic and discursive concept of delirium through a reading of *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (1908) and *Formprobleme der Gotik* (1911).

In Chapter 3, I approach Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) as a delirious text by contrasting it with his earlier reflections on the visual arts in *Worpswede* (1903) and *Briefe an Cézanne* (1907).

In the fourth and final Chapter, I offer a close or "haptic" reading of Benn's 1915 prose text "Gehirne."

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Joshua Eric Dittrich was born in 1980 in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin and grew up in New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia. In 2002, he received a BA with highest distinction in Comparative Literature from the University of Virginia with a thesis entitled “Vision and Crisis: Volker Schlöndorff’s Film Adaptation of Robert Musil’s *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß*” supervised by Professor Renate Voris. Josh also played double bass in the Charlottesville University Symphony Orchestra and drove a bus for University Transit Service. Josh began graduate work at Cornell University in the fall of 2002, pursuing interests in German modernism, 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry, Marxism and literary theory. In the academic year 2006-07 he lived and studied in Berlin under the auspices of a Fulbright Fellowship. He currently lives in Toronto, Ontario where he teaches courses in German and Professional Writing at the University of Toronto.

For St.

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"God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!" —Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*



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## PREFACE

“It astonished her to think that so much could be lost, even the quantity of hallucination belonging just to the sailor that the world would bear no further trace of. She knew, because she had held him, that he suffered DT’s. Behind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind’s plowshare. The saint whose water can light lamps, the clairvoyant whose lapse in recall is the breath of God, the true paranoid for whom all is organized in spheres joyful or threatening about the central pulse of himself, the dreams whose puns probe ancient fetid shafts and tunnels of truth all act in the same special relevance to the word, or whatever it is the word is there, buffering, to protect us from. The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie, depending on where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost.”

—Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

## INTRODUCTION

### READING DELIRIUM: WORRINGER, RILKE, BENN

For now we no longer have that primary, that absolutely initial, word upon which the infinite movement of discourse was founded and by which it was limited; henceforth language was to grow with no point of departure, no end, and no promise. It is the traversal of this futile yet fundamental space that the text of literature traces from day to day.<sup>1</sup>

—Michel Foucault

It may seem self-defeating to invoke a language “with no point of departure, no end and no promise” at the beginning of a dissertation on literature. Indeed, Foucault’s sense of literature here reads like a cross between an epitaph and a Sisyphean nightmare: here lies literature, cut off from its vital, primal “word” and condemned forever to drag itself, if not exactly up an impossible slope, then back and forth in an impossible movement that starts nowhere and goes nowhere, promising only a futile oscillation of the same. Yet precisely in limiting literature in this way, Foucault also gives us enough ideas and images to construct a theory of literary writing and reading that may be more productive than one would first think.

First of all, we note the two-fold temporality of the above passage: once upon a time there was a primal or initial word, some power of language that was capable of generating an “infinite movement of discourse.” Now that word is gone, and in its wake language merely grows “with no point of departure, no end, and no promise.” Nevertheless, this language is still situated in a particular place (“a futile yet fundamental space”) and literature is given to follow its particular kind of repetitive movement (the “traversal” that “literature traces from day to day”). If that movement has “no point of departure, no end, and no promise,” then there is a certain sense in

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<sup>1</sup>Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans anon. New York: Vintage Books, 1970, p. 44.

which that movement, precisely in departing from and arriving nowhere, *creates* the very space, or non-space, of its traversal. Literature is a language that both occupies the space allotted to it by the absence of that primal word, and at the same creates that space through the movement that traces its limits, a movement that takes place literally *nowhere* except in itself. And the “tracing” movement that Foucault describes can be understood both as the *writing* of the marks that double as the limit of its movement, and the *reading* of those traces it leaves behind.

In this dissertation, I describe such literary (non-)spaces by tracing the movement that constitutes them in certain texts of modern German literature, drawing principally from my three main authors Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965), Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), and Gottfried Benn (1886-1956)—and their respective texts to which I devote an entire chapter each—*Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* (1908), *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), and “Gehirne” (1915). These spaces may be found in a landscape, a cathedral, a canvas, a city, a human brain, or, last but not least, a sheet of paper; yet the movement that traverses and defines those spaces – creative and futile, fundamental, yet ungrounded – will be same each time. And its written trace will pose the same problem for reading that I call “delirium.”

I approach “delirium” in two ways: (1) in the broadest conceptual terms, delirium denotes for me a *structure* of language (by which I also mean: thoughts, words, concepts and their aesthetic experience) that incorporates or seeks to incorporate *chaos* within it. Delirium is the ultimate structuring principle not because it seeks to turn all chaos into order, but rather to absorb chaos into itself as a rhythm or oscillation of its very nature. It thus lies between a total systematizing impulse and a radically anarchic fragmentation of thought. Likewise (and closer to its more conventional usage as “hallucination” or “delusion”), I situate delirium between

reason and madness. But this “between-ness” of delirium is *not* an alternative to the “either/or” of reason and its opposite; rather it is a single movement of thought and expression that seeks to comprehend both poles at once: reason *and* madness, totality *and* fragmentation.

In Part I of this Introduction, I explicate my sense of “delirium” by appropriating Foucault’s clinical definition of delirium from his 1961 *History of Madness* in conjunction with two other Foucauldian concepts that the above epigraph already implies: namely, exteriority (or the “thought from outside,” from Foucault’s 1966 essay of the same name) and Unreason (also from the *History of Madness*). Taken together, these two concepts make possible an understanding of Foucauldian delirium that is not just a phase in the history of madness, but also as a specific kind of language that transcends ordinary discourse and lands itself in that “fundamental, futile space” of literature. Through my specific connection of Foucault’s diffuse speculations of the “thought from outside,” Unreason and clinical delirium, I effectively appropriate “delirium” as a concept of literary style.

(2) I show in Part II that “delirium” characterizes an entire poetic and aesthetic discourse in the German context at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not strictly speaking identical with Expressionism, yet very much a part of its development, I argue that “delirium” fuses the verbal radicalism of Expressionist poetics with the contemporary art-historical discourse on haptic vision (e.g., Worringer) into a particular literary style that moves away from traditional notions of mimesis, representation and signification and approaches a language of pure abstraction and verbal autonomy. It is a question of the need or desire to break away from linguistic “depth” (by which I mean grammar, syntax and meaning) toward a pure or primal power of language that would be in essence non-referential, immediate and poetic. Yet, in the specific texts I analyze of Rilke and Benn, that desire oscillates with, on the

one hand, a paralyzing uncertainty or inability to access that primal “surface” of language, and on the other, the reluctance or even fear of being exposed to the very subjective and linguistic structures that one wants to abandon.

In Part III, I explain my approach to reading the literature of this period through the visual problematic of haptic vision. And in Part IV, I situate my approach within the field of recent approaches to these authors and this period.

## Part I: Delirium as a Style

Here I construct a theory of delirium as a literary style out of Michel Foucault’s essayistic speculations on literature and the *History of Madness* (1961). I connect two of his concepts—“the thought from outside,” and “Unreason”—to configure “delirium” as a fundamental structure of thought and a style of writing.

Foucault’s “thought from the outside” is not so much a concept as a movement of thought and, implicitly, language.<sup>2</sup> He uses a richly mixed spatial metaphoric to express this movement which emanates throughout the ambiguities of his language, but is nowhere localizable it:

A thought that stands outside subjectivity, setting its limits as though from without, articulating its end, making its dispersion shine forth, taking in only its invincible absence; and that, at the same time, stands at the threshold of all positivity, not in order to grasp its foundation or justification but in order to regain the space of its unfolding, the void serving as its site, the distance in which it is constituted and into which its immediate certainties slip the moment they are glimpsed – a thought that, in relation to the interiority of our philosophical reflection and the positivity of our knowledge, constitutes what in a word we might call “the thought from the outside.” (150)

The thought from outside depends on the spatial metaphor of a pure interiority of the subject and of language, and a pure exteriority that is radically without the subject

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<sup>2</sup> “La pensée du dehors” in *Critique*, 229, 1966. I cite from the English translation by Brian Massumi, which appears as “The Thought of the Outside” in Foucault’s *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Essential Works of Foucault, II*. Ed. James Fenton. New York: The New Press, 1998.

(though as we will see, not necessarily without language). This is not a dialectical opposition: Foucault elsewhere insists that the outside *not* be understood as the negation of the inside (152) because that dialectical move would only reinscribe a new form of interiority, would only think exteriority from the fixed, centered position of the inside. The metaphor of the thought from outside is still spatial, but in a different way: a space of interiority surrounded at its edge by an outside that it will not interiorize, but rather into which it unfolds, scatters and disperses itself. This movement neither negates the inner, nor does it interiorize the outer, rather it empties itself into the void that is paradoxically also the space through which its movement passes, a non-space that is “raw,” “naked,” “distant,” “shimmering (148-9)” This thought (this speech, this writing) is thus not outside thought (or language), but the outside *of* thought (and language), a movement toward the outside that both exceeds and is sustained by the catachresis of inside and outside. It is a thinking and writing that is not constrained by logic and grammar, but that uses logic and grammar insofar as it seeks to undo them.

When the subject crosses that threshold that is also a void, it must surrender itself to language’s scattering in order to risk the thought from outside.<sup>3</sup> Without surrendering itself, exposing itself to the “danger that the naked experience of language poses” (149), the subject would only reinscribe its form of (dialectical) interiority, and whatever outer thought is shimmering there in the distance would remain unseen and unthought. What is at stake for Foucault, then, is the difficulty of a “breakthrough to a language from which the subject is excluded, the bringing to light

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault’s thought here may be indebted here to Martin Heidegger’s discussions of the language of German poetry, particularly his 1946 essay on Rilke “Wozu Dichter?” in *Holzwege* (originally published in 1949/50). See my Chapter 3 for a discussion of Heidegger’s essay in the context of Rilke’s *Aufzeichnungen*. For more on the relation of Foucault’s early thought to Heidegger’s thought (particularly through their respective confrontations with phenomenology and their connections to Swiss existential psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger), see Allan Megill’s *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 199-201.



of a perhaps irremediable incompatibility between the appearing of language in its being and consciousness of the self in its identity [. . .]" (149). He writes:

In short, it is no longer discourse and the communication of meaning, but a spreading forth of language in its raw state, an unfolding of pure exteriority. And the subject who speaks is less the responsible agent of a discourse [. . .] than a non-existence in whose emptiness the unending outpouring of language uninterruptedly continues. (148)

The paradox of this statement is that the speaking subject must transform itself into a non-existence precisely through speaking. But how does one *become* non-existent, and how does one write or speak oneself into a non-existent time or place? The subject must, through conscious will or an impulse of questioning, pursue language beyond the point where its subjective coherence remains intact. The subject must consume itself, not to be reborn of its ashes like a dialectical phoenix, but rather to persist in the void of non-existence so that language itself will begin to speak from the non-point where the subject breaks down.

What I investigate in this project is the movement toward this point of exteriority where language speaks itself, a movement that, as Foucault envisions it, is perpetually suspended, interrupted precisely where it is at the same time unfolding and dispersing. The subject, as both the agent of this movement of thought and that through which it passes, thus retreats from the void by the very same gesture that it casts itself into it. It is this *gesture* of writing, in a primal sense of the metaphor, that I analyze as a *style* called delirium.

But how to proceed from Foucault's concept of the exteriority of thought to a style, and even a gesture of writing? I suggest that the link is to be made through "Unreason," another elusive Foucauldian concept that emerges in his *History of Madness* (1961). The history of the title of that book already speaks to the difficulty of the concept. The book first appeared as *Folie et Dérason: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, with "Dérason" given special emphasis by its capital "D." In subsequent

French editions the phrase “Folie et Dérailson” only appears in smaller type on the title page, but not the cover. For the 1972 French edition, it disappears altogether, and the book’s new title is reduced to its former subtitle: *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*.<sup>4</sup> Ian Hacking traces this genealogy in his forward to the new English edition of Foucault’s text, suggesting that the disappearance of “Unreason” from the text marks Foucault’s shift away from what Hacking calls the “romantic” approach to madness and toward the “archaeological” method of his later works.<sup>5</sup> It seems that in shifting away from a phenomenological engagement with madness as an experience to an “archaeological” excavation of madness as a discourse, the emphasis on “Unreason” had to be excluded. Here I want to define “Unreason” to the extent that Foucault’s sparse and scattered reflections on it throughout his *History* allow it, to show how this difficult and eventually abandoned term can be recuperated as a concept for the description of a literary style.

Unreason is Foucault’s term for the fundamental affinity and shared origin of the supposedly opposed forces of reason and madness. Throughout his book, Foucault is interested in this primary, originary phase of madness when it was not exactly and explicitly opposed to (and oppressed by) reason, but rather one with it. Both madness and reason are captured and swept along by the same movement of bodily and mental forces (body, soul, passion, spirit) that contain and express them. The vicissitudes of

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<sup>4</sup> See *History of Madness*. Ed. Jean Khalfa. Trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa. London: Routledge, 2006. This edition also reproduces all the prefaces and appendices of the various editions, which also underwent considerable cutting and re-writing.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault’s own terms for this shift would be from a “phenomenological approach” to a “theory of discursive practice.” In the 1970 preface to the English edition of *The Order of Things*, Foucault writes: “If there is one approach that I do reject, however, it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity – which, in short leads to a transcendental consciousness. It seems to me that the historical analysis of scientific discourse should, in the last resort, be subject not to a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice” (xiv). Foucault may want to reject a “theory of the knowing subject” for the purposes of discourse analysis, but I suggest here that such a “subject,” as a heuristic device, is crucial for reconstructing the writing and reading of the literary style of delirium.

the movement itself, of the mutual activity of forces that constitute madness and reason as a unity, is, I suggest, the object of his study, and by “object” I mean that which, in precisely the “phenomenological” way he will later dismiss, he tries to evoke, recreate and allow to speak in his discourse, not merely that which he talks about. He wants to trace that movement to the point where it divides itself, where the union of forces conjoining madness and reason tears itself apart, where reason once and for all distinguishes itself from madness. In doing so, he presumes nothing of “reason” and “madness” from a modern perspective as normative, self-sufficient terms or concepts; rather they become for him signifiers of forgotten, misunderstood concepts that must be reconstructed out of discursive fragments from the past, so that their mutual movement and eventual separation can be understood. Hence his discursive analysis has fundamental affinities with literary analysis: he is interested in a particular kind of language as an expression of human reason/madness: “all those imperfect words, of no fixed syntax, spoken falteringly, in which the exchange between madness and reason was carried out” (Preface *xxviii*).

It is here that Foucault’s concept of delirium is crucial for understanding how Unreason relates to madness, and how both can be connected back to “the thought from the outside” and, eventually, to my readings of Worringer, Rilke and Benn. In a word, delirium is the language of madness, its discourse and its structure. It describes and *is* that movement of the passions, body and soul which expresses both the unity of madness and reason, and their perpetual slippage back into the primal disintegration of Unreason. The following lengthy passage is worth citing in full for the richness and complexity of the concept it unfolds:

The parallelism and complementarities, all the immediate forms of communication that we have seen manifest themselves in madness between the soul and the body, depend on this [delirious] language and its powers. The movement of passion that is followed through until it reaches its breaking point and turns on itself, the eruption of the image, and the agitation of the body that was the visible concomitant – all that

we were trying to exhume was already secretly animated by this language. If the determinism of passion is surpassed and undone in the fantasy of the image, and if the image in its turn took over the whole world of beliefs and desires, it was because the delirium of language was already present in the form of a discourse that liberated passion from its limits, and clung to the liberated image with the constraining weight of its affirmation.

It is in that delirium, which is both body and soul, language and image, and grammar and physiology, that all cycles of madness end and begin. The rigorous meaningfulness of delirium organized these cycles from the outset. Delirium is both madness itself, and beyond each of its phenomena, the silent transcendence that constitutes it, in its truth. (237-8)

Delirium is a concept that *is* its own transcendence, and that precisely in moving beyond itself, also constitutes itself as what it already always was. It is a structure that is also the temporal unfolding and reversing of a structure upon itself, a unity (of body, mind, soul, passion, language) that disperses itself into its constituent parts and at the same time draws them all together as speech and gesture. It is the liberation from a limit that is itself constrained by its liberation. As difficult and contradictory as it may be to think this concept, we can note for now its fundamental similarity to the “thought from outside.” Both concepts depend on the suspension of a moment of disintegration or dispersion: on the one hand, the casting out of the subject into a void or non-place and, on the other, the exposure to the “endless night” of Unreason (156). But how can we bring them together into a single gesture of writing?

At one point in his discussion of delirium, Foucault cites an 18<sup>th</sup> century medical textbook that contains the following definition: ““Delirium – from *Deliro*, to rave or talk idly; which is derived from *Lira*, a Ridge or Furrow of Land. Hence *Deliro* properly imparts, to deviate from the Right, that is, right Reason.”” (237).<sup>6</sup> At the root of delirium is a metaphor, which is worth taking quite literally: a farmer plowing furrows across his limited plot of land in the most rational, economical way. To move beyond the furrows would be a literal delirium: an irrational trespass or

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<sup>6</sup> See Foucault’s *History*, p. 619 n.61.

inefficiency on the part of the farmer and perilous exposure for the crop. Yet the movement that creates a furrow in the first place (the movement of the plow back and forth across a field), is the same movement that *could* deviate from it any point. At the end of its passage, at the proper limit of the field, the plow reverses on itself, but it *could* turn too much or not enough. It risks a literal delirium at every turn.

As I take my own risk of belaboring this point too much, I turn to another primal metaphor not of madness, but of *writing*, namely boustrophedon, literally “as the ox turns”, a phase in the history of European writing when lines were written right-to-left and then left-to-right, like the movement of a plow (a metonym for ox) across a field. The metaphor of writing in furrows survives (as a dead metaphor) in the etymologies of several modern European works for reading that suggest harvesting or gathering from the furrows (German *lesen*, French *lire*, Spanish *leer* etc). Although numerous contemporary historians of script have described this procedure, a passage from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (1765) is particularly salient:

At first [the Greeks] adopted not only the characters of the Phoenecians, but also the direction of their lines from right to left. Later it occurred to them to write in furrows, that is, writing alternately from left to right and right to left. Finally, they wrote according to our present practice of starting each line from left to right. This development is quite natural. Writing in furrows is undoubtably the most comfortable to read [la plus commode à lire]. I am even surprised that it did not become the established practice with printing; but, being difficult to write manually, it had to be abandoned as manuscripts multiplied. (20)<sup>7</sup>

What is interesting in this speculative history of writing is that it preserves a structure of belatedness. Reading, Rousseau suggests, is fundamentally reversible, but writing by hand is not. Yet even after the invention of a technology that effectively emancipated the reading eye from the writing hand, the more “comfortable” style of

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<sup>7</sup> *On the Origin of Languages*. Trans. John Moran and Alexander Goode. U of Chicago Press, 1966.

reading was avoided, the printed text was styled as if it were a manuscript. The reading eye still follows a path prescribed for it by the writing hand, and thus on some level, Rousseau seems to suggest that we read any and every text through the metaphor of a manuscript.<sup>8</sup>

Yet if that metaphor carries over in Rousseau's speculative account, then I would argue that the boustrophedonic metaphor also survives alongside it as a possible way of conceiving writing as a literal and metaphorical movement (of a writing hand, of language, of thought), oscillating back and forth between the limits of a "field," a "territory," in a word, a *space*. This space may be a literal one (e. g., a piece of paper), but I argue that it is also the same space that Foucault describes in the "Thought from Outside": a "placeless place" (24), an abstract territory constituted by thought, speech and writing. The "thought from outside" uses the very material of this "space" and the laws of its composition to thwart it and suspend it: it is not simply a question of getting outside that space, nor of remaining in it, but rather of arriving at the outside *of* the space, the exteriority that is still proper to it and to which one only gains access by the delirium of writing. For what is that placeless place if not also Unreason, "the subterranean peril of unreason, the threatening space of absolute liberty" (157), that primal "field" traversed by a movement of reason that is also necessarily the possibility of the deviation from reason: not just madness, but quite literally delirium? And to step out of the furrows, to de-viate *via* de-lirium into *Dé-raison*, is that not a possibility inherent to the very gesture of writing? It is a question of a contradictory gesture in writing and in thought that, according to the after-life of the boustrophedonic metaphor, both turns toward *and* away from itself in the same movement of reversal, return and detour. I thus appropriate Foucault's concept of

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<sup>8</sup> I derive this reflection in part from Jacques Derrida's commentary on this passage of Rousseau's *Essay in Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, pp. 287-9.

delirium (as the link between Unreason and the “thought from outside”) to describe a contradictory movement toward an exteriority of thought and language that is at once liberating and threatening.

I call this movement a “style” because it evokes the palimpsest of metaphors that surrounds the gesture of writing and because it serves as a descriptive tool for the reading of texts. Setting aside the aesthetic and art-historical problem of style and the school of literary criticism known as stylistics, I use the term here to mobilize the metaphors of writing toward a reading of texts by Worringer, Rilke and Benn.<sup>9</sup>

Jacques Derrida makes a similar heuristic and etymological experiment in *Spurs*:

*Nietzsche’s Styles* (1978):

In the question of style there is always the weight or *examen* of some pointed object. At times this object might be only a quill or a stylus. But it could just as easily be a stiletto, or even a rapier. Such objects might be used in a vicious attack against what philosophy appeals to in the name of matter or matrix, an attack whose thrust could not but leave its mark, could not but inscribe there some imprint or form. But they might also be used as protection against the threat of such an attack, in order to keep it at a distance, to repel it—as one bends or recoils before its force, its flight, behinds the veils and sails (*des voiles*). [. . .] Thus style would seem to advance in the manner of a *spur* of sorts (*éperon*). (37-9)<sup>10</sup>

The spur as stylus becomes the metaphor by which Derrida describes the style of

Nietzsche’s text. The ambiguity of the spur (as spur and as *éperon*)—it both attacks

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<sup>9</sup> Such an investigation into stylistics is beyond the scope of this project, but to carry it out, one would have to examine the parallel development of what Worringer calls *Stilpsychologie* in the visual arts (a discipline that would also include the work of Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin) and the linguistic and literary analyses undertaken by Leo Spitzer in his *Stilstudien* (1928). Karlheinz Barck has already suggested such an investigation in “Worringer’s Stilpsychologie im Kontext der Stilfeorschung” in Hannes Böhringer and Beate Söntgen (eds.) *Wilhelm Worringers Kunstgeschichte* (München: Fink, 2002), 23-34. Incidentally, Helga Grebing has shown that Worringer and Spitzer were friends and colleagues during Worringer’s professional appointment in Bonn. See Grebing’s “Bildungsbürgerlichkeit als Lebenssinn: Soziobiographische Annäherungen an Wilhelm und Marta Worringer” in the same volume, p. 203. Grebing has gone on to publish a full-length biographical study of Wilhelm and Marta Worringer, which is unfortunately unavailable to me at the time of this writing. See her *Die Worringers: Bildungsbürgerlichkeit als Lebenssinn. Wilhelm und Marta Worringer (1881-1965)*. Berlin: Parthas, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles. Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*. Trans. Barbara Harlow. Forward by Stefano Agosti. Drawings by François Loubrieu. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

and protects, exposes the truth and keeps it at a safe distance, blinds the eyes of the philosopher and penetrates through the blinding veil of thought—makes possible for Derrida a literal, metaphorical and multilingual reading of Nietzsche’s spurs (i.e., his *Spuren*, German for “marks” or “traces,” hence his style) that questions hermeneutics, ontology and sexuality.

The metaphoric of the spur anticipates Derrida’s later conception of a “problem” in *Aporias* (1993) as both a protection and projection of thought.<sup>11</sup> To be in the “nonpassage” of aporia does not simply mean that one faces an insoluble problem. Rather it suggests a position of the utter inability even to pose a problem in the first place:

[. . . a position] where the very project or the problematic task becomes impossible and where we are exposed, absolutely without protection, without problem [. . .]. There, in sum, is this place of aporia, *there is no longer any problem*. Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem that would constitute itself and that one would keep in front of oneself, as a presentable object or project, as a protective representative or a prosthetic substitute, as some kind of border still to cross or behind which to protect oneself. (12).

Although the content of each Derrida’s texts does not connect specifically to my project, his work opens the possibility of using a metaphoric of style as both a tool for the investigation of a specific body of texts and as a way of questioning the very structure and movement of philosophical problems. In a similar way, I simultaneously use the metaphoric of delirious style to question a specific body of texts and to reflect on the functioning of style itself as that which, always in specific ways and in specific contexts, creates the limits of literary language.

Before I discuss the specific historical and stylistic continuities between Worringer, Rilke and Benn in Part II, I want to anticipate how the texts of theirs that I have chosen can be read in the context of “delirium” as I describe it above. The non-

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<sup>11</sup> See p. 12-3 in *Aporias*. Trans. Thomas Dutoit. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.



points or “placeless places” of exteriority become a literal reality in the literary texts of Rilke and Benn and the art-historical texts of Worringer that I have selected. Malte, the protagonist of Rilke’s *Aufzeichnungen* writes:

Es ist lächerlich. Ich sitze hier in meiner kleinen Stube, ich, Brigge, der achtundzwanzig Jahre alt geworden ist und von dem niemand weiß. Ich sitze hier und bin nichts. Und dennoch, dieses Nichts fängt an zu denken und denkt, fünf Treppen hoch, an einem grauen Pariser Nachmittag diesen Gedanken: [there follows the so-called “great questions”<sup>12</sup>]. Wenn aber dieses alles möglich ist, auch nur einen Schein von Möglichkeit hat, – dann muß ja, um alles in der Welt, etwas geschehen. Der Nächstbeste, der, welcher diesen beunruhigenden Gedanken gehabt hat, muß anfangen, etwas von dem Versäumten zu tun; wenn es auch nur irgend einer ist, durchaus nicht der Geeignetste: es ist eben kein anderer da. Dieser junge, belanglose Ausländer, Brigge, wird sich fünf Treppen hoch hinsetzen müssen und schreiben, Tag und Nacht: ja er wird schreiben müssen, das wird das Ende sein. (6: 728)<sup>13</sup>

[It is ridiculous. Here I sit in my little room, I, Brigge, twenty-eight years old now and known to no one. Here I sit, and I am nothing. And yet, this nothing begins to think, and five flights up, on a grey Paris afternoon [. . .]. But if all of this is possible, if there is even so much as a glimmer of possibility to it, then something must be done, for pity’s sake. Anyone – anyone who has had these disquieting thoughts – must make a start on some of the things that we have omitted to do; anyone at all, no matter if he is not the aptest to the task: the fact is, there is no one else. This young foreigner of no consequence, Brigge, will have to sit himself down, five flights up, and write, day and night: yes, that is what it will come to – he will have to write. (14, 16-7)]<sup>14</sup>

Rilke’s protagonist pronounces himself a nothing, and despite his precise temporal and spatial coordinates (28 years old, a gray Paris afternoon, in a little room on the sixth floor), it is from the time and place of non-existence that Malte begins to write. His writing is a risk, a wager: *if* it is possible that so much experience has been wasted, has

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<sup>12</sup> See Manfred Engel’s afterword (p. 332) to the Reclam edition of *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge. Sämtliche Werke*, Band 6. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1966. All of Rilke’s works are cited in German according to this edition. I discuss this passage again in Chapter 3.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout the dissertation, whenever published English translations are available, I cite them in brackets following passages cited from the original German. See here *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Trans. Michael Hulse. London: Penguin Books, 2009.

passed by unnoticed, has been omitted (*versäumt*), then Malte will have to write. Not knowing for certain if his project is possible or even has a semblance of possibility, he undertakes it anyway, in a simultaneous gesture of incipience, endlessness and finality. He will begin to do something about *das Versäumte* through writing, he will write ceaselessly, day and night, and that constant beginning will already be the end of his project. Thus Malte situates his writing, impossibly, at the outside of thought, effacing his temporal and spatial existence, yet writing down the paradoxical traces of what that defacement leaves behind.

Dr. Werff Rönne, Benn's protagonist in the series of so-called "Novellen" published under the title *Gehirne* (1916), also writes from an existential no man's land. In the first of the novellas, Rönne asks himself, "Wo bin ich hingekommen? Wo bin ich? Ein kleines Flattern, ein Verwehen" (III: 31).<sup>15</sup> Simply by posing the question of his physical location, Rönne renders irrelevant the obvious answer (namely, in a rural hospital in southern Germany) and thereby situates himself elsewhere: outside of geographical coordinates, professional activity, and the history of a personal inwardness, Rönne is a flutter, a blowing-away, a passing phenomenon that occupies no space and time at all, an image of pure transience without location or duration. In "Der Geburtstag," another piece from *Gehirne*, Rönne makes a link between his nowhere-ness and a Rilkean *Versäumte* of humanity as a whole:

Welches war der Weg der Menschheit gewesen bis hierher? Sie hatte Ordnung herstellen wollen in etwas, das hätte Spiel bleiben sollen. Aber schließlich war es doch Spiel geblieben, denn nichts war wirklich. War er wirklich? Nein; nur alles möglich, das war er. (III: 57)

[What had been mankind's way thus far? An effort to bring order into something that should have remained play. But after all, it had remained play in the end, for nothing had reality. Did he have reality? No; all he

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<sup>15</sup> Benn, *Sämtliche Werke*, Band III, Prosa 1. Ed. Gerhard Schuster. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1986. I cite this edition of Benn's work throughout. I discuss this passage further in Chapter 4.

had was every possibility. (9)]<sup>16</sup>

Like Malte, Rönne has an insight into the errors and omissions of a humanity that mistakenly believes it has established reality out of pure chance, gamble, or play. And like with Malte, that insight brings with it both the abandonment of reality and the arrival of a sense of possibility: nothing is real, not even Rönne himself, but he is all that is possible, he is a totality of possibility beyond the limits of a self, indeed of an entire humanity. And that sense of exposure to the nothingness and the nowhere-ness of reality, an exposure which is always also an openness to absolute possibility, is accompanied by the imperative to write. In the opening paragraph of “Gehirne,” Rönne announces, “Ich will mir ein Buch kaufen und einen Stift; ich will mir jetzt möglichst vieles aufschreiben, damit nicht alles so herunterfließt” (III: 29).

Wilhelm Worringer belongs to this same category of delirious writing not just through his historical influence on both Rilke and Benn and the Expressionist movement as a whole (see Part II of the Introduction and especially Chapter 2), but more so through the particular style in which he writes. His writing on ancient and medieval art and architecture is a sustained performance of ekphrasis whereby all the expressive visual qualities he attributes to historical styles are presented tacitly as rhetorical qualities of his own writing. The style of his writing effectively usurps the style of the objects under consideration, folding the referentiality of his language back onto itself. Moreover, the main style that Worringer wants to describe, the expressive Gothic style in northern medieval Europe, is itself a confused and contradictory hybrid of organic-empathetic and inorganic-abstract styles that violates its own structural principles and the viewer’s sensibility.<sup>17</sup> In his *Formprobleme der Gotik* (the 1911

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<sup>16</sup> Benn, “The Birthday” Trans. E. B. Ashton in *Primal Vision: Selected Writings of Gottfried Benn*. Ed. E. B. Ashton. New York: New Directions Publishing, 1971.

<sup>17</sup> I discuss Worringer’s style in detail in Chapter 2. Throughout I cite the standard edition of Worringer’s work, his *Schriften*. Ed. Hannes Böhringer, Helga Grebing, Beate Söntgen. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2004, which retains the pagination from the last editions of the works originally published during Worringer’s lifetime: *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie*. München: Piper, 1959; and *Formprobleme der Gotik*. Piper, 1930. For English translations, I cite:

sequel to *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*), Worringer writes that the Gothic line

[. . .] vergewaltigt unser Empfinden zu einer ihm unnatürlichen Kraftleistung. Nachdem einmal die natürlichen Grenzen organischer Bewegtheit durchbrochen sind, gibt es kein Halten mehr; immer wieder wird die Linie gebrochen, immer wieder in ihrer natürlichen Bewegungstendenz gehemmt, immer wieder gewaltsam von einem ruhigen Auslaufen zurückgehalten, immer wieder zu neuen Ausdruckskomplikationen abgelenkt, so dass sie, durch all diese Hemmungen gesteigert, ihr Äusserstes an Ausdruckskraft hergibt, bis sie schliesslich, all der Möglichkeiten natürlicher Beruhigung beraubt, in wirren Zuckungen verendet oder unbefriedigt im Leeren abbricht oder sinnlos in sich selbst verläuft. (32)

[{ . . . } forces our sensibility to an effort unnatural to it. When once the natural barriers of organic movement have been overthrown, there is no more holding back: again and again the line is broken, again and again checked in the natural direction of its movement, again and again it is forcibly prevented from peacefully ending its course, again and again diverted into fresh complications of expression, so that, tempered by all these restraints, it exerts its energy of expression to the uttermost until at last, bereft of all possibilities of natural pacification, it ends in confused, spasmodic movements, breaks off unappeased into the void or flows senselessly back into itself. (41)]

Worringer transposes the paradox of unperceivable lines in art and architecture into unreadable lines of written text. Such lines do not come to a conclusion nor do they ever properly begin; they are rather constantly (that is, “*immer wieder*” – Worringer repeats the phrase no less than four times in the above passage) deflected, interrupted, retarded and accelerated by the forces that constitute them and yet work against them at the same time. The self-violation and self-referentiality of the line is also the violation of the viewer’s ability to perceive *and*, implicitly, the reader’s ability to read. The Gothic line is traced as much in the lines of a cathedral as on the pages of Worringer’s text, and the experience of unthinkability *in* those lines is the same whether seen in the cathedral or read on the page. Worringer’s writing thus embeds

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*Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*. Trans. Michael Bullock. Intro. Hilton Kramer. Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997; and *Form in Gothic*. Ed. Trans and Intro. Herbert Read. New York: Schocken Books, 1957.

one paradox within another to create a self-referencing, self-undermining textual movement which he describes as follows: “Wir finden keinen Punkt, wo wir einsetzen, keinen Punkt wo wir haltmachen könnten. Jeder Punkt ist innerhalb dieser unendlichen Bewegtheit gleichwertig, und alle zusammen sind sie gegenüber der durch sie reproduzierten Bewegtheit wertlos” (37) [“We find no point of entrance, no point of rest. Every point in this endless movement is of equal value and all of them combined are without value compared with the agitation they produce” (56)]. With no starting point or end point, and with an infinite movement that voids its position precisely as it occupies it, Worringer’s writing becomes as delirious as Benn’s and Rilke’s, tracing the same “futile, yet fundamental space” that Foucault described at our point of departure.

## Part II: Delirium as Verbal Sensation: Haptic Space and the Poetic Word

Worringer’s writing provides a crucial link between vision and reading. Over and over again, he implies that reading his text supplants looking at the artifacts he describes. Gothic style, Worringer suggests, can be translated into literary language without remainder; or better yet, since the Gothic style is itself *already* a failed translation (namely of organic form into/onto inorganic structural principles), the literary translation is only the ceaseless repetition and escalation of the same failure, the same impasse of thought and vision, and implicitly, of writing and reading.

Worringer mobilizes one particular concept that makes this translation possible: haptic vision. Haptic vision endows the sense of sight with the immediacy of touch: seeing an object in a haptic space (a plane or surface) amounts to immediate and total physical contact with the true essence of the form, an essence which optical representation can only distort. The appeal of Worringer’s rhetoric can only reside in this chain of substitution: vision equals touch; vision equals reading; therefore, reading

equals touch. The frustrated, suspended movement of the Gothic line becomes legible only because of the promise of an immediate total knowledge attained directly through reading, through verbal-visual-tactile sensation. Of course the promise is never realized, and his writing remains, to say it with Foucault, without promise. Yet the allure of that immediacy characterizes all of Worringer's writing and, I argue, the entire aesthetic and poetic discourse in which Worringer's writings were situated—the same discourse in which, as I will show, Benn and Rilke also belonged.

The concept of haptic vision was inaugurated by Viennese art historian Alois Riegl who first used the term in *Stilfragen: Grundlegung zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (1893) and developed it in *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901).<sup>18</sup> But it was Riegl's influence on Worringer and his propagation of Riegl's ideas in *Abstraction and Empathy* that disseminated this concept throughout the aesthetic and poetic discourses of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> Haptic vision, as both a model of vision and an organization of space structured around the sense of touch, rather than sight, presupposes a need for the suppression of depth in the representation of space. Here Worringer cites Riegl directly and at length:

“Diese Ebene ist nicht die optische, die uns das Auge bei einiger Entfernung von den Dingen vortäuscht, sondern die haptische (taktische), die uns die Wahrnehmungen des Tastsinnes suggerieren, denn von der Gewißheit der tastbaren Undurchdringlichkeit hängt auf dieser Stufe der Entwicklung auch die Überzeugung von der stofflichen Individualität ab” (AE 78)

[“This plane is not the optical, with which, if we are at any distance from things, the eye deludes us, but the haptic (tactile), which is suggested to us by the perceptions of the sense of touch; for it is upon the certitude of tangible impermeability that, at this stage of

<sup>18</sup> I owe these references to Claudia Öhlschläger's *Abstraktionsdrang: Wilhelm Worringer und der Geist der Moderne*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> For a close account of what Worringer borrowed—and distorted—from Riegl in historiographical terms, see Michael W. Jennings, “Against Expressionism: Materialism and Social Theory in Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*” in *Invisible Cathedrals: The Expressionist Art History of Wilhelm Worringer*. Ed. Neil Donahue. Penn State University Press, 1995, 87-104.

development, the conviction of material individuality also depends”  
(41)]

According to this model, the sense of touch is the only reliable means of ascertaining the material individuality of an object, the “*Ding an sich*” of sensory experience. The suppression of depth in a visual representation, the presentation of the object on a single plane or surface, comes as close as possible in visual terms to achieving the certainty of the sensation of touch. Numerous critics have noted the connection between Worringer’s hostility toward optical space (his own term is “*geistiger Raumscheu*”) and the abstract style.<sup>20</sup> But to my knowledge no critic has emphasized the bizarre biologicistic fantasy that grounds Worringer’s concepts of haptic vision, spatial dread and abstract redemption:

Jene körperliche Platzangst läßt sich volkstümlich erklären als ein Überbleibsel aus einer normalen Entwicklungsstufe des Menschen, in der er, um mit einem sich vor ihm ausdehnenden Raum vertraut zu werden, sich noch nicht allein auf den Augeneindruck verlassen konnte, sondern noch auf die Versicherung seines Tastsinnes angewiesen war. Sobald der Mensch Zweifüßler und als solcher allein Augenschensch wurde, mußte ein leises Unsicherheitsgefühl zurückbleiben. In seiner weiteren Entwicklung aber machte sich der Mensch durch Gewöhnung und intellektuelle Überlegung von dieser primitiven Angst einem weiten Raum gegenüber frei. (49-50).

[In popular terms, this physical dread of open places may be explained as a residue from a normal phase of man’s development, at which he was not yet able to trust entirely to visual impression as a means of becoming familiar with a space extended before him, but was still dependent upon the assurances of his sense of touch. As soon as man became a biped, and as such solely dependent upon his eyes, a slight feeling of insecurity was inevitably left behind. In the further course of his evolution, however, man freed himself from this primitive fear of extended space by habituation and intellectual reflection. (15-6)]

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<sup>20</sup> This is the starting point of Neil Donahue’s study of German Expressionist prose in his *Forms of Disruption: Abstraction in Modern German Prose*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993, pp. 28-30. See Part IV below for my critique of Donahue’s argument. Claudia Öhlschlager’s recent book argues that Worringer’s concept of abstraction functions as a fundamental discursive element in the intellectual-historical, art-historical and scientific transformations of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She connects Worringer’s theory of abstraction to the “*Erzeugung des Unsichtbaren*” which she views as a crucial aesthetic, poetic and scientific problem in and around those discourses where Worringer’s influence was felt.

It seems a biological “fact” for Worringer that every primitive culture, just like every individual person, suffers from a fear of the outside world that can only be allayed by the sense of touch. When the primitive individual (one almost wants to say “infant” in the psychoanalytical sense<sup>21</sup>) learns to walk on two-feet and thus becomes once and for all an “ocular man” (*Augenmensch*), the feeling of uncertainty before an optical space that will remain forever untouchable remains as an instinctive urge hard-wired into the physiology of perception, if not explicitly present to the intellect. Worringer’s entire theory of abstraction and empathy rests on this foundation, approaching the history of culture and art implicitly through the biological fiction of a single human moving towards and away from a haptic plane.

The haptic aspect of Worringer’s theory resonated particularly with Viennese literary critic Herman Bahr, who in his book *Expressionismus* (written in 1914 and published 1916), saw it as the basis of the entire epoch in which art serves the same function for the modern man as the sense of touch served for primitive man

(*Urmensch*):

Und wenn ihn [den Urmenschen] die Wirklichkeit durch ihre Tiefe verstört dadurch, daß er sie sich nicht ertasten kann, daß sie weiter reicht, als er greifen kann, daß immer hinter allem noch ein anderes und immer wieder etwas droht, so befreit ihn die Kunst, indem sie die Erscheinung aus der Tiefe holt und sie in die Fläche setzt. Der Urmensch sieht Linien, Kreise, Quadrate, und sieht alles flach. Beides aus demselben inneren Bedürfnis, die drohende Natur von sich abzuwenden. Sein Sehen hat immer Angst, überwältigt zu werden, und so verteidigt es sich gleich, es leistet Widerstand, es schlägt zurück. Jeder äußere Reiz alarmiert sogleich den inneren Sinn, der immer bereit steht, niemals die Natur einläßt, sondern sie Stück für Stück aus der Flucht der Erscheinungen reißt, aus der Tiefe in die Fläche bannt, entwirklicht und vermenschlicht, bis ihr Chaos von seiner Ordnung

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<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1903) contains an implicit theory of haptic vision: see his discussion of scopophilia as the analogy of looking and touching in *Three Essays*. Trans. James Strachey. Basic Books, 1962, pp. 22-3. Worringer’s writing does not seem to bear any explicit Freudian influences, yet if one substitutes “infantile” for “primitive” in the above passage, one ends up with a distinctly psychoanalytic analogy of individual to cultural development: every culture, like every subject, has its infancy, its primitive stage, which it never quite overcomes through a process of development in which each subsequent stage bears the traces of all previous ones.



bezwungen ist. (cited in Öhlschläger, 44-5)

Written clearly under Worringer's influence<sup>22</sup> (not only conceptually, but stylistically—we note, in advance my discussion in Chapter 2, the long sentences, repetition of clauses, even phrases such as a “immer wieder”), Bahr's text suggests the same fundamental analogy of primal and modern man. The visual fear of the primitive before an endlessly receding optical space is homologous to the anxiety and alienation of the modern subject who needs to banish the chaos of optical space by the order of haptic space.

This shift (or relapse) from an optical to a haptic paradigm of visual representation had arguably long permeated the atmosphere of the visual arts in Europe at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. For example, although he avoids the biologicistic and existential categories of Worringer and Bahr, Heinrich Wölfflin suggests a similar reversal of haptic and optical space in his 1915 study *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*.<sup>23</sup> Wölfflin's distinction between linear and painterly style corresponds essentially to haptic and optical models of vision.<sup>24</sup> And yet Wölfflin goes on to describe the possibility, within the overall development of style, of a *synthesis* of these two styles:

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<sup>22</sup> See also Viktor Žmegač's “Zur Vorgeschichte des Expressionismus: Hermann Bahr und Wilhelm Worringer” in his edited volume *Tradition und Innovation. Studien zur deutschsprachigen Literatur seit der Jahrhundertwende*. Wien: Böhlau, 1993, pp. 213-33. I owe this reference to Öhlschläger.

<sup>23</sup> See *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*. Trans. M. D. Hottinger. New York: Dover Publications, 1950. I regret that the original German text, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, was not available to me at the time of this writing.

<sup>24</sup> In a linear style: “[t]he tracing out of a figure with an evenly clear line has still an element of physical grasping. The operation which the eye performs resembles the operation of the hand which feels along the body, and the modeling which repeats reality in the gradation of light also appeals to the sense of touch. A painterly representation, on the other hand, excludes this analogy. It has its roots only in the eye and appeals only to the eye, and just as the child ceases to take hold of things in order to “grasp” them, so mankind has ceased to test the picture for its tactile values. A more developed art has learned to surrender itself to mere appearance. With that, the whole notion of the pictorial has shifted. The tactile picture has become the visual picture—the most decisive revolution which art history knows.” (21).

And if we can say that in the linear style the hand has felt out the corporeal world essentially according to its plastic content, the eye in the painterly stage has become sensitive to the most various textures, and it is no contradiction if even here the visual sense seems nourished by the tactile sense—that other tactile sense which relishes the kind of surface, the different skin of things. Sensation now penetrates beyond the solid object into the realm of the immaterial.” (27).

The notion of an immaterial sensation, of a sensation that fuses the tactility of haptic vision with distance and holism of the optical and painterly, is a crucial component of the visual discourse of this period. And it is homologous to Worringer’s concept of Gothic style (itself a kind of synthesis of abstract and empathetic stylistic impulses) and lends support to the idea that the discourse of the visual arts saw itself in a return or transition to a haptic stylistic paradigm. I want to suggest here that Worringer’s writing—borrowing from Riegl and here echoed by Bahr and, *mutatis mutandis*, Wölfflin—makes that shift explicit and, given Worringer’s rapid dissemination among artists, critics and writers involved in Expressionism, led a generation of artists to understand their own artistic activity, on some level, as the production of haptic space.

The difficulty for literature in this case is to find an analogous technique of abstraction that would create a haptic space in language, to find the equivalent of the suppression of optical depth that presents an image of abstract totality directly to the reader. Hence the guiding presupposition of my readings of Rilke and Benn: as I read their texts, I presume that they are, on some level, engaged in an experiment in writing that seeks to imitate or translate visual abstraction into a literary form. But I suggest that the literary version of visual abstraction is in fact a particular kind of concretion of language: the way to make literary language abstract is to render it as tangible, concrete and material as possible. Language, as it is traditionally conceived, is abstract in its essence: it is a designation in sound or script of some absent referent. Visual arts, on the other hand, reproduce their referent or object in form and color; they make it visible *in* the work. If painting is to become abstract, the object as such

must be removed from the work, and/or the processes of reproduction and perception must be seen to interpose themselves explicitly between the object and the viewer. If literary language is to be analogously “abstract,” then its inherent abstraction must be reversed: rather than pointing beyond itself to an absent or imaginary referent, the literary text must be made to point back at itself, become a closed system, a formal composition, a material object open to visual scrutiny. Accordingly, I propose that, to a certain extent, such a self-referential text is to be looked at as much as it is to be read. Each sentence stands alone and is worthy of contemplation, each word is composed as to capture the eye.<sup>25</sup> Gottfried Benn, in the 1951 speech, “Probleme der Lyrik,” has emphasized the role of visual appearance in reading poetry:

[I]ch persönlich halte das moderne Gedicht nicht für vortragsfähig, weder im Interesse des Gedichts noch im Interesse des Hörers. Das Gedicht geht gelesen eher ein. Der Aufnehmende nimmt von vornherein eine andere Stellung zu dem Gedicht ein, wenn er sieht, wie lang es ist und wie die Strophen gebaut sind. [. . . D]as optische Bild unterstützt meiner Meinung nach die Aufnahmefähigkeit. Ein modernes Gedicht verlangt den Druck auf Papier und verlangt das Lesen, verlangt die schwarze Letter, es wird plastischer durch den Blick auf seine äußere Struktur, und es wird innerlicher, wenn sich einer schweigend darüber beugt. (VI: 41)

The modern poem for Benn becomes paradoxically more inward when it becomes “more plastic,” and that plasticity is constituted by a certain way of reading that more closely resembles seeing or looking: the reader’s eyes see a visual-tactile object first, and Benn suggests that reading is less a cognitive, temporal process than a glance by which the “receiver” (not the reader) takes in the silent, outer structure through verbal-ocular contact.

Benn’s comments from 1951 look back upon an entire poetic discourse that understands itself as searching for the same visual immediacy in poetic language that

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<sup>25</sup> Frederic Jameson’s describes a similar development in the style of Wyndam Lewis’ *Tarr* (1918), “a book which, as in few others, the sentence is reinvented with all the force of origins, as sculptural gesture and fiat in the void” (2) in *Fables of Aggression: Wyndam Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979.

the visual arts present in haptic space. One sees this striving for verbal immediacy already in the programmatic writings of early Expressionism. If we look briefly at the writings of some of the major proponents of the Expressionist movement, we see that a central concern of Expressionist poetics was something like the emancipation of the word from its linguistic depth and its presentation on a haptic verbal plane. The word was to be endowed with an explosive, expressive power to rewrite grammar and syntax, attaining an immediate expression rather than a meaning mediated by conventional linguistic structures. Such an expression toward haptic immediacy is the precondition for the writing and reading of delirium in this historical context.

Kurt Pinthus, in his preface to *Menschheitsdämmerung* (1920), the most important anthology of German Expressionist poetry, characterizes the poetic language of that movement as a tendency toward “Eruption, Explosion, Intensität,” toward the conscious breaking-apart of language, world and reality that would simultaneously effect the building of a new world of poetic expression, word for word, feeling for feeling.<sup>26</sup> The ambiguity of Pinthus’ description (always pairing destruction with creation, fragmentation with composition, despair with ecstasy) and even the ambiguity of the title itself suggests something of delirium as an intensification of the word toward both pure form and pure formlessness, absolute meaning and absolute destruction of meaning.

The programmatic writings of Expressionist poet Franz Werfel speak to a more specifically linguistic intervention of Expressionism that emancipates the word from the sentence and inaugurates a new mode of poetic signification that I call delirious. In a text that originally appeared in the Expressionist journal *Die Aktion* in 1917 under the title “Substantiv und Verbum: Notiz zu einer Poetik,” Werfel describes the

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<sup>26</sup> *Menschheitsdämmerung: Ein Dokument des Expressionismus*. Ed. Kurt Pinthus. Berlin: Ernst Rowohlt Verlag, 1955.

liberation of the poetic word as follows:

Das Substantiv des Verses ist vieldeutig, assoziativ, symbolisch. Es ist ein Gefäß, das es dem Leser überläßt, die eigene durch das Verbum des Dichters aufgerufene Vision einzufüllen. [. . .] Und gerade in dieser Tausenddeutigkeit besteht sein überwältigend Konkretes. Konkret ist nicht, was sinnlich eindeutig faßbar, sondern was am assoziativsten ist, was mehr Welt in sich hat. Das Substantiv des Verses ist delphisch, es hat die innere vieldeutige Überdeutlichkeit, doch auch das Gedämpfte des Geheimnisses. [. . .] Das Verbum des Verses ist mehr, als eindeutig. Es ist überbestimmt und gegen den Leser unerbittlich, denn es ist der Träger der Leidenschaft und der Tat. Nicht ist es der Ausdruck eines Tuns, sondern dieses Tuns selbst. (157-8)<sup>27</sup>

Werfel describes two interesting effects of the poetic word on the reader: because of the radical ambiguity of the poetic word (its polysemy, its overdetermination), the reader is put into an unspecified, but active role, forced to interpret words according to his own vision (“die eigene Vision. . . einzufüllen”), which the text should provoke rather than simply provide. Secondly, this poetic word, for all its ambiguity, is not abstract, but rather concrete. When the univocally referential, semantic dimension of a word is obscured, the word itself attains a special concreteness, the immediacy of an act.

If we turn to another programmatic piece by Herwarth Walden, the founder of the Expressionist journal *Der Sturm*, we see how a similar poetics of the word grounds, albeit programmatically, an entire aesthetic theory. Like Werfel, Walden, in a piece entitled “Das Begriffliche in der Dichtung” that appeared in his journal *Der Sturm* in 1918, describes the supremacy of the word over the sentence, and his repetitive, rhythmical language presumably intends to perform the style about which he speaks:

Das Wort herrscht, das Wort beherrscht die Dichter. Und weil die

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<sup>27</sup> Franz Werfel, “Substantiv und Verbum: Notiz zu einer Poetik” in *Die Aktion*. Vol. 7, no. ½, pp. 4-8. Reprinted in and cited according to *Theorie des Expressionismus*. Ed. Otto F. Best. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1976. 157-63.

Dichter herrschen wollen, machen sie gleich einen Satz über das Wort hinweg. Aber das Wort herrscht. Das Wort zerreißt den Satz, und die Dichtung ist Stückwerk. Nur Wörter binden. Sätze sind stets aufgelesen. (156)<sup>28</sup>

The unity of the sentence is derived from the double power of words both to tear the sentence to pieces and to bind it together. The sentence, then, is *Stückwerk*, an unfinished montage of words, and only possesses meaning insofar as it is picked up or gathered together (*aufgelesen*) with other sentences. The word *aufgelesen* implies a different mode of reading in addition to the different mode of poetic composition: one does not read a sentence so much as one *looks at* words. For the word, in Walden's view, becomes a visual, plastic object, part of visual structure of words that is both concrete (as in Werfel) and abstract (in the sense of *ungegenständlich*), but visible all the same:

Das Material der Dichtung ist das Wort. [. . .] Wort muß zur Wort gefügt werden, wenn ein Wortgebäude entstehen soll, das man Dichtung nennt. Die sichtbarkeit jeder Kunst ist die Form. Form ist die äußere Gestaltung der Gesichte als Ausdruck ihres inneren Lebens [. . .] Ein Kunstwerk gestalten heißt ein Gesicht sichtbar machen. [. . .] Jedes Kunstwerk fordert seinen Ausdruck. Der äußere Ausdruck ist die innere Geschlossenheit. Die innere Geschlossenheit ist die Schönheit des Kunstwerks. Die innere Geschlossenheit wird durch die logischen Beziehungen der Wortkörper und der Wortlinien zueinander geschaffen. [. . .] Jedes Wort hat seine Bewegung in sich. Es wird durch die Bewegung sichtbar. Die einzelnen Wörter werden nur durch ihre Bewegung zueinander, aufeinander, nacheinander gebunden. Nichts steht, was sich nicht bewegt. Kreist doch selbst die Erde. Kreist doch die Welt. Das ist die innere Sichtbarkeit. Die ungegenständliche Dichtung. (149, 156)

Walden's paratactic language does not so much offer an articulate aesthetic theory as a barrage of words and concepts that accumulate a certain kind of rhythm, intensity and expressiveness. Just as he describes, his words seem to mean more than the sentences

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<sup>28</sup> Herwarth Walden. "Das Begriffliche in der Dichtung" in *Der Sturm*. Vol. 9 (1918). pp. 66 and ff. Reprinted and cited: Best (ed.), *Theorie des Expressionismus*.

of which they are apart. This is an aesthetic of the word, of form, of expression (as the union of outer form and inner essence [*Geschlossenheit*]), of the visibility of the abstract, of verbal bodies and lines, of life and of movement. Walden seems deliberately to elide conceptual contradictions (e.g., how the outside *is* the inside, how the visual is also non-objective, how standing is a kind of movement), implying that our reading of the text must follow not the meanings of the words, their logic or conceptuality, but rather attend to the movement and rhythmical power of their accumulation on the page.<sup>29</sup> In other words, Walden implies a delirious reading as a consequence of this compressed aesthetic theory.

Lothar Schreyer's "Expressionistische Dichtung"<sup>30</sup> echoes Walden's ideas on rhythm and verbal power as well as his paratactic style. He writes, "Jeder Dichter ist Wortschöpfer. Jeder Dichter hat jedes Wort neu zu schaffen" (176). The word, as the creative element of poetry, must be recreated, and to underscore this poetic imperative, Schreyer refers less and less to poetry (*Dichtung* or even *Gedichte*), but instead to the *Wortkunstwerk*, the verbal work of art: "Das Wortkunstwerk wirkt in der Zeit, ist ein Nacheinander von Wortgestalten, die nur durch die Bewegung, das Nebeneinander zu einer Einheit zusammengeschlossen werden können" (175). The unity of the poem depends upon the juxtaposition of "Wortgestalten," a syntax of verbal figures that comprises a rhythmical *movement*, but not a meaning:

Das Wortkunstwerk ist keine Mitteilung von Gedanken oder von

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<sup>29</sup> For a recent account of rhythm as a major discursive and aesthetic concept in and around the time of German Expressionism, see Michael Cowan's "*Die Herz-Turbine: Rhythm and Urban Experience in the Poetry of Gerrit Engelke (1890-1918)*" in *German Quarterly*. Vol. 81. Fall 2008, no. 4. pp. 424-48. Cowan does not focus particularly on Expressionist poetics, but rather through the example of Engelke's poetry, shows how the alienating rhythms of modern life can be re-appropriated aesthetically and re-harmonized with the individual and social body. In his account, rhythm seems to be inherently productive and positive as a vital force and poetic device. In the discussion of Deleuze in this chapter and of Benn's "Staatsbibliothek" in Chapter 1, I suggest that rhythm is not inherently structuring, but rather itself a delirious oscillation between structure and chaos.

<sup>30</sup> Originally published in *Sturm-Bühne, Jahrbuch des Theaters der Expressionisten*. Berlin: Verlag Der Sturm, 1918-19. Folge 4/5, pp. 19f. Reprinted and cited: in Best (Ed), *Theorie des Expressionismus*.

Gefühlen, sondern Kunde einer Offenbarung. Das Wortkunstwerk kann wohl Gedanken und Gefühle auslösen, aber kein Gedanke und kein Gefühl gibt uns den Zustand der Offenbarung. Erst im Nichtdenken und Nichtfühlen sind wir und das Kunstwerk eins. (179)

The *Wortkunstwerk* does not appeal to the understanding or even to the emotions; rather precisely in not-thinking and not-feeling does the poem have its revelatory effect, its epiphanic fusion of the reader and the work through the rhythm of verbal figures.

And returning to Benn and his concept of verbal expression, we see that, in his “Expressionismus” (1933), he characterizes as “rein expressionistisch” the poet’s relation to the autonomous, isolated word:

Beladung des Wortes, weniger Worte, mit einer ungeheuren Ansammlung schöpferischer Spannung, eigentlich mehr *ein Ergreifen von Worten aus Spannung*, und diese gänzlich mystisch ergriffenen Worte leben dann weiter mit einer real unerklärbaren Macht von Suggestion. (IV, 80)

Benn refers again and again to that same inexplicable power of the word that emerges out of a mystical void, charged with a tension both aesthetic and metaphysical, and he says that a poem composed of such words cannot be read by the rational mind so much as grasped by the brain itself. In the “Epilog und Lyrisches Ich,” (1928) he writes:

Es gibt im Meer lebend Organismen des unteren zoologischen Systems bedeckt mit Flimmerhaaren. Flimmerhaar ist das animale Sinnesorgan vor der Differenzierung in gesonderte sensuelle Energien, das allgemeine Tastorgan, die Beziehung an sich zur Umwelt des Meers. Von solchen Flimmerhaaren bedeckt stelle man sich einen Menschen vor nicht nur am Gehirn, sondern über den Organismus ganz total. Ihre Funktion ist eine spezifische, ihre Reizbemerkung scharf isoliert: sie gilt dem Wort, ganz besonders dem Substantivum, weniger dem Adjektiv, kaum der verbalen Figur. Sie gilt der Chiffre, ihrem gedruckten Bild, der schwarzen Letter, ihr allein. (III: 131)



Benn links the printed word with the primal biology of prehistoric life. The sensorium of the human brain is reduced to the crude differentiating function of a *Flimmerhaar*, grasping either a word or nothing as the organism's sole connection to the outside world. This is perhaps the most radical verbal poetics of the period, so radical that the poetic model is distorted into a regressive biological fantasy (not unlike Worringer's) in which the rational mind, the cerebral self, and the *lyrisches Ich* are all reduced to a primal, total, tangible relation to the word or the void.

To situate Rilke in the same poetic and aesthetic discourse of Expressionism proper is not altogether implausible. Though his more productive periods may have been both before and after the "Expressionist decade," Christa Saas has exhaustively shown that his work bears significant thematic and poetic overlaps with Expressionism.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the impact of painters like Van Gogh and Cézanne on Rilke's theory and practice of art place him firmly within the same artistic wake that influenced the Expressionists.<sup>32</sup> A poem of Rilke's ("Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens," which I discuss in Chapter 3) was included in an important Expressionist anthology *Die Erhebung* (1919).<sup>33</sup> And Rilke's name appears 15 times in the pages of Albert Soergel's literary-historical compendium *Im Banne des Expressionismus* (1925).<sup>34</sup> In my discussion of *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, I argue

<sup>31</sup> Christa Saas, *Rilkes Expressionismus*. [Dissertation]. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc, 1968.

<sup>32</sup> For the decisive influence of Van Gogh and Cézanne on German Expressionism, see John Willet, *Expressionism*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1970, especially pp. 25-33. See also Wolf-Dieter Dube, *Expressionism*. Trans. Mary Whittal. New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 14-6. For the impact on Rilke of Van Gogh and Cézanne, see his *Briefe II*, pp. 107-12; 263-5; and all the letters to Clara Rilke dating from October, 1907 in *Briefe II* and *III*. These letters are reprinted respectively in: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Über moderne Malerei*. Ed. Martina Krießbach-Thomasberger. Insel Verlag, 2000; and Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe an Cézanne*. Ed. Clara Rilke. Afterword Hans Weigand Petzet. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1952. I discuss the impact of Van Gogh and particularly Cézanne on Rilke in Chapter 3.

<sup>33</sup> Ed. Alfred Wolfenstein. *Die Erhebung. Jahrbuch für neue Dichtung und Wertung*. 2 vol. Berlin: S. Fischer, 1919-1920.

<sup>34</sup> This volume, which went through multiple editions and printings, was a special supplement to Soergel's history of early 20<sup>th</sup> century German literature, *Dichtung und Dichter der Zeit: Eine*

that a new mode of writing (which is also a new mode of perception and reading) named in that text as “die neue Auslegung” plays a structurally similar role to the Expressionist word: it is a new interpretation of reality to be achieved through seeing and writing that both compels and terrifies Malte, forcing his writing out of the furrows as he oscillates back and forth between these two alternatives. The delirium of his writing in the *Aufzeichnungen* is central to the thesis of this project.

In terms of a direct connection between Rilke and Worringer in particular, we know from a 1913 letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé that Rilke read Worringer’s *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* “mit unbedingter Zustimmung.”<sup>35</sup> That Benn was familiar with Worringer’s work we know only in passing from later texts,<sup>36</sup> but given Benn’s proximity before and after WWI to the Expressionist literary circles in Berlin (especially Herwarth Walden’s *Der Sturm*, which published Worringer’s 1911 article where he used the term “Expressionist” for the first time), we can assume that Benn certainly knew of Worringer’s work.

It is now clear that Expressionism already contains its own implicit linguistic theory, however fragmentary, programmatic or exaggerated, of the autonomy of the word. This word destroys and rebuilds language and is charged with a mystical or rhythmical power that does not speak to the rationality of the understanding, but attains the immediacy of an expression. And expression is illegible, in the conventional sense of the word: it is a perceptual immediacy that works directly on the

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*Schilderung der deutschen Literatur der letzten Jahrzehnte*, and was published as *Neue Folge: Im Banne des Expressionismus*. Leipzig: R. Voigtländer Verlag, 1925.

<sup>35</sup> *Briefe aus den Jahren 1907-1914*. Ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber. Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1933. Christa Saas is the first to point out this connection between Rilke and Worringer’s “*Bibel des Expressionismus*” as another proof of Rilke’s proximity to the movement (Saas, 225). Neil Donahue also cites this Rilke passage in his argument to link Worringer and Rilke through the concept of spatial form. See Donahue, *Forms of Disruption*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> There is a brief mention of Worringer in Benn’s “Rede auf Stefan George” (1934) as well as in the section “Stil und Entartung” from *Doppelleben* (1949, V, 153) and in “Einleitung zu *Lyrik des expressionistischen Jahrhunderts*” (1955, VI: 209).

body, not the mind. What is most interesting in this survey of Expressionist meta-texts is that the expression that seems to the conscious goal of these writers stands necessarily beyond the grasp of conscious linguistic activity. If a writer's words no longer mean what he wants them to mean, even if he wants those words to be precisely ambiguous in their meaning, he is no longer in control of his language. And from the reader's perspective, if the words on the page do not speak to the rational mind, but to the eye, to the body, to a self-less brain covered with crudely groping cilia, then the process called reading also becomes a loss or surrender of self. To anticipate a claim by Worringer in his *Formprobleme der Gotik* (1911), there is such a thing as an auto-expression (*Eigenausdruck*) in a work of art that is not a question of our perception of the work, but rather of the imposition of the work's own life and expressive power (*Ausdrucksmacht*) over us.<sup>37</sup>

To read such an *Eigenausdruck* in its literary manifestation is the paradox of reading delirium. What is at stake here, then, is the confrontation between a rational, linguistic movement for expression (either through writing or reading) and the necessarily irrational, non-linguistic forces unleashed by that expression. When language is consciously used to violate its own rules, the reader's or writer's self (insofar as it, too, is a linguistic and perceptual agency) is also somehow violated. Yet that violation can also be seen as a liberation, an activation of the potential for new forms of thought, sensation and experience. It is the question of an expression at the edge of language, reason and perception that pulls the writer or reader back and forth across a limit of intelligibility. The depiction of that back-and-forth movement as delirium is the object of my readings in the subsequent chapters.

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<sup>37</sup>In *Formprobleme der Gotik*, Worringer writes, "Kurz: die nordische Linie lebt nicht von einem Eindruck, den wir ihr willig geben, sondern sie scheint einen *Eigenausdruck* zu haben, der stärker ist als unser Leben" (32) ["In short, the Northern line does not get its life from any impress which we willingly give it, but appears to have an *expression of its own*, which is stronger than our life" (41)]. I discuss this passage again in Chapter 2.

### Part III: Reading Delirium as the Outside of Language

Such an oscillating structure (whether it is called “delirium” or not) is already a feature of some critical approaches to the literature of this period. Hugo Friedrich’s magisterial study, *Die Struktur der moderne Lyrik: von Baudelaire bis zur Gegenwart* (1956) points out the impasse faced by the reader of a poem that has explicitly abandoned meaning as one its essential characteristics:

Wie in der modernen Malerei das autonom gewordene Farben- und Formengefüge alles Gegenständliche verschiebt oder völlig beseitigt, um nur sich selbst zu erfüllen, so kann in der Lyrik das autonome Bewegungsgefüge der Sprache, das Bedürfnis nach sinnfreien Klangfolgen und Intensitätskurven bewirken, daß das Gedicht überhaupt nicht mehr von seinen Aussageinhalten her zu verstehen ist. Denn sein eigentlicher Gehalt liegt in der Dramatik der äußeren wie inneren Formkräfte. Da ein derartiges Gedicht immerhin noch Sprache ist, aber Sprache ohne mitteilbaren Gegenstand, hat es die dissonantische Folge, daß es den, der es vernimmt, zugleich lockt wie verstört. (12)<sup>38</sup>

The reader of the verbally autonomous poem is lured on by the phatic or semantic functions inherent to language, yet disturbed by the conscious thwarting of those functions in the poem. The meaning of the poem is transferred from its content (*Aussageinhalt*) to the dramatics of its exterior formal powers, a contradiction that, Friedrich insists, cannot be overcome. The modern poem remains inassimilable and incomprehensible, stranding the reader between the seductive and impassive qualities of its language, and the only recourse lies not in reading, but in recognizing and describing such poems:

Das Erkennen solcher Dichtung nimmt ihre schwierige oder unmögliche Verstehbarkeit als ein erstes Merkmal ihres Stilwillens auf.

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<sup>38</sup> Hugo Friedrich, *Die Struktur der moderne Lyrik: von Baudelaire bis zur Gegenwart*. Hamburg: Rowohl Verlag, 1956.

Weitere Merkmale können festgestellt werden. [. . .] Das Erkennen folgt schließlich der Vieldeutigkeit dieser Texte, indem es sich selbst in den Prozess eingliedert, den sie beim Leser in Gang bringen wollen: den Prozess der weiterdichtenden, unabschließbaren, ins Offene hinausführenden Deutungsversuche. (13)

Once meaning is excluded from poetry, the readerly task is an autopsy-like examination, a cataloging of the structure of the poem, recognizing and describing the various stylistic parts that are, as it were, no longer animated by the life of meaning or understandability. At best, one hopes to forge another link in a chain of “weiterdichtenden, unabschließbaren, ins Offene hinausführenden Deutungsversuche,” a chain that encircles the central problem of a linguistic structure (a text, a poem) that has exploded the agency of its writing and reading. So long as one forecloses the problem of an impersonal, non-linguistic agency that speaks through the writer and destabilizes the position of the reader, the work of recognition and description can progress.

When Benn mentions Worringer in his 1949 autobiographical piece, *Doppelleben*, he places him in the middle of a jeremiad on the current state of literary criticism:

Aber auch hierüber habe ich mir schon gelegentlich gewisse Gedanken gemacht. Darunter den, daß unsere Literaturgelehrsamkeit, die sogenannte Literaturhistorie, keine eigenen Methode entwickelt hat, wie es die Kunstgeschichte durch Wöfflin, Pinder, Worringer getan und wie es Taine für die Literatur in Frankreich besorgte. Sie hat keine Grundlagenthetik zu schaffen vermocht, keine Grundbegriffsoperationen durchgeführt, sie nimmt sich ihre Begriffe aus fremden Disziplinen: Philologie, Psychologie, Moral, Politik, Geschichtswissenschaften und aus diesem Sammelsurium entstehen dann Urteile, die dem Dilettantismus sehr nahe stehen. Wenn sie “Zusammenhänge” glaubt feststellen zu können, dann ist das Glück schon groß, notabene thematische und biographische Zusammenhänge – stilistische, sprachliche, sprachtechnische, syntaktische, metaphorische Probleme erörtert sie kaum. (V, 153-4)

Benn laments the inability of most German literary historians to say anything about literature that is itself proper to literature, i.e., that works with concepts unique to literary language and that works directly with the stylistic, syntactical and metaphorical problems posed by literary language. This is a strange criticism from a writer like Benn, whose literary production (and especially his essayistic and critical writings) consist so profoundly of borrowings from “foreign” disciplines.<sup>39</sup> Yet as a provocation, Benn’s comparison contains some value: what would a literary history look like if it were modeled after a discipline with a “proper method” like (Worringerian) art history, yet at the same time worked fundamentally with the elements of literary language, that is, with the poetics of the word? Here I want to take Benn’s provocation literally, as well as Hugo Friedrich’s passing analogy of the study of modern poetry to modern painting, and appropriate some “foreign” concepts from Gilles Deleuze’s book on *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981).

The first is the concept of sensation itself. One thesis of Deleuze’s book is that Francis Bacon (1909-1992) is the painter of sensation *par excellence*. Sensation, opposed to perception, is a form of aesthetic experience that explodes the subject-object relation in a shared interaction of the movements, forces and rhythms that traverse a work of art and its spectator. Bacon, following a path in modern painting initiated by Cézanne, does not so much paint images or figurative representations, or even colors: he paints the rhythms and movement of sensations that act directly on the nervous system of the viewer.

Sensation is the opposite of the facile and the ready-made, the cliché, but also of the ‘sensational,’ the spontaneous, etc. Sensation has one face turned toward the subject (the nervous system, vital movement,

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<sup>39</sup> See for example Holger Hof’s *Montagekunst und Sprachmagie: Zur Zitiertechnik in der essayistischen Prosa Gottfried Benns*. Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 1997, which exhaustively tracks all of Benn’s citations in three paradigmatic essays, according to the thesis that Benn’s major intellectual and artistic achievement in his prose is his montage of the thoughts and words of other writers.

‘instinct,’ ‘temperament’—a whole vocabulary common both to naturalism and Cézanne), and one face turned toward the object (the ‘fact,’ the place, the event). Or rather, it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly, it is Being-in-the-World, as the phenomenologists say: at one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the same body that, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation. As a spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed. (31)<sup>40</sup>

Deleuze significantly (though with a dubious neurological accuracy) excludes the brain from the nervous system. The brain, as the organ of cognition and perception, is incapable of participating in the immediacy of the painting’s sensation, which happens both *in* the painting and *in* the non-cerebral nervous system of the spectator. Aesthetic sensation is too primal and too immediate for the brain, which depends upon spatial, temporal and perceptual structures that sensation precisely defies. In his introduction, Deleuze’s English translator Daniel W. Smith compares sensation to a reversal of the Kantian model of synthetic perception: instead of a rational process that unites a sequence of apprehended images (however chaotic) into an object of perception, the logic of sensation dismantles the “object” into raw sensory impressions and reveals both the rhythm and chaos of their effect on the body.<sup>41</sup> In the case of painting, sensation comes in at the eye, as it were, though it also depends on a rhythm that unites all of the sensory organs into one pure visual function:

Painting gives us eyes all over: in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs (the painting breathes . . .). This is the double function of painting: subjectively, it invests the eye, which ceases to be organic in order to become a polyvalent and transitory organ; objectively, it brings before us the reality of a body, of lines and colors freed from organic representation. And each is produced by the other: the pure presence of the body becomes visible at the same time that the eye becomes the destined organ of this presence. (45)

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<sup>40</sup> Gilles Deleuze. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. Afterword Tom Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, pp. xv-xxiii.

Deleuze creates an image of a body covered with eyes to describe how sensation in painting turns the organic body into a body without organs, a body capable of sensation in each and all of its now primal, eye-like zones. Benn's vision of a brain-becoming-body covered with primitive cilia would be another version of non-cerebral sensation in response to the autonomous, expressive word freed from its representative function, communicating directly with its writer and reader. And the reciprocity, or non-dialectical, subjective-objective immediacy of sensation echoes the Worringerian concept of *Eigenausdruck*.<sup>42</sup>

A second, related concept from Deleuze that bears on my theory of reading is the Figure. As I state above, I am interested in delirium as the attempt to fuse the expressive power of the word (its potential for absolute meaninglessness or meaningfulness, its transformation into a visual, plastic and sonorous object) with the notion of a self that simultaneously shapes and is disfigured by his language. The self, in delirium, is constantly posited, effaced, re-inscribed and defaced by writing and reading, at the mercy of forces that it simultaneously invokes and eludes. In (Deleuze's account of) Bacon's paintings, this self would be called the Figure. The Figure is not figurative (i.e., it does not represent some object or person in a mimetic or realistic way) nor is it entirely an abstraction (pure lines and color, e.g., Kandinsky, Mondrian or Pollock). In Bacon's paintings, the Figure is rather a kind of figurative, representational formation (usually of a human and/or animal) that is constantly distorted by a movement toward abstraction (toward the contours and structures that isolate, deform and dissipate the figurative qualities). The Figure thus avoids both figurative and abstract painting, but the forces of each, in acting upon it, unleash a

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<sup>42</sup> For a detailed account of the connections between Worringer's and Deleuze's aesthetics, see Joseph Vogl's "Anorganismus: Worringer und Deleuze" in *Wilhelm Worringer Kunstgeschichte*. Ed. Hannes Böhringer, Beate Söntgen. München: Wilhelm Fink, 2002. 181-92.



sensation that either extreme would keep trapped: “The Figure is the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh, whereas the abstract form is addressed to the head and acts through the intermediary of the brain, which is closer to the bone.” (31). The task of the painter is to “*make visible* a kind of original unity of the senses, [which] would make a multisensible Figure appear visually” (37).

Sensation and the Figure are the key terms of what, in this text, Deleuze loosely calls a clinical aesthetic. If the sensation of the Figure transforms the spectator into a body covered with eyes, a body in which all organic functions are subsumed to a single visual function, which reconstitutes the organic body as an all-seeing body without organs, then this amounts to a kind of hysteria. Hence the hysteria of Bacon’s Figures (as spastics or paralytics with indeterminate body parts) and the hysteria of sensation, of the organic body having been colonized by a host of transitory eyes. But Deleuze does not take this in a psychoanalytic sense as the pathology of a subject who would be susceptible to analysis; rather the clinical condition becomes a kind of metaphor for sensation: a pathology, its experience, etiology, and symptoms, become a way of theorizing the sensation of a work of art. The line between the clinical and the aesthetic is heuristically effaced, and each provides a way of thinking about the other, since the forces and energies that drive them are indeed the same.<sup>43</sup>

And if painting and hysteria are the privileged aesthetic form and clinical pathology of the *Logic of Sensation*, then, in the *Essays Clinical and Critical* (1993), the privileged form is literature and its pathology is delirium. In his preface to this

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<sup>43</sup> “What we are suggesting, in effect, is that there is a special relation between painting and hysteria. It is very simple. Painting directly attempts to release the presences beneath representation, beyond representation. The color system is a system of direct action on the nervous system. This is not a hysteria of the painter, but a hysteria of painting. With painting, hysteria becomes art. Or rather, with the painter, hysteria becomes painting.” (45)

collection of essays on literary texts, Deleuze says that writers are constituted by their ability “bring to light new grammatical or syntactic powers. They force language outside its customary furrows, they make it delirious [*délirer*]” (v).<sup>44</sup> Paraphrasing a remark by Proust that describes the task of the writer as the invention of a new or foreign language within the mother tongue, Deleuze suggests the invention of such a language requires distortions of grammar and syntax, that is, distortions of the “customary furrows” of language. He adds that:

when another language is created within language, it is language in its entirety that tends toward an “asyntactic,” “agrammatical” limit, or that communicates with its own outside. The limit is not outside of language, it is the outside *of* language. It is made up of visions and auditions that are not of language, but which language alone makes possible. (v)

Language attains a certain exteriority that is not outside or beyond itself, but rather its *own* outside, an exterior limit that is nevertheless proper to it.<sup>45</sup> And this exteriority of language is the limit which language shares with seeing and hearing. When a writer brings language to its outside, he allows certain “visions and auditions” to come into language that would be impossible if the writer (as seer and hearer) remained entirely *in* language, or entirely *outside* of it. It is thus a question of coming out of the furrows of language, but not out of language altogether, hence the aptness of delirium as *the* (clinical) metaphor of literature:

It is a delirium that invents [these visions and auditions], as a *process* driving words from one end of the universe to the other. They are

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<sup>44</sup> Deleuze, *Essays Clinical and Critical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

<sup>45</sup> Deleuze is paraphrasing Michel Foucault’s essay, “The Thought from Outside.” Other literary discussions of delirium (*délire*) in the French context tend to focus on the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and/or on psychoanalysis. See Shoshana Felman. *Writing and Madness: Literature / Philosophy / Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Martha Noel Evans and Felman, with Brian Massumi. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985. Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy Through the Looking-Glass: Language, Nonsense, Desire*. La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985. Juan Rigoli. *Lire le délire: Aliénisme, rhétorique et littérature en France au XIXe siècle*. Preface Jean Starobinski. Fayard, 2001.

events at the edge of language. But when delirium falls back into its *clinical state*, words no longer open out onto anything, we no longer hear or see anything through them except a night whose history, colors and songs have been lost. Literature is a health. (v)

Literature is a health, but it is a delirious health that oscillates between a positive, liberating creative potential, and the impasse of paralysis, chaos, and “the night.”<sup>46</sup> Delirium is the indeterminacy of the impasse and the way out of the impasse. The writer must risk the creation a delirious language in order to save himself from the clinical delirium that, at the same time, constitutes his openness and sensitivity to the vitality of sensation and the chaos of “the night.”

The world is a set of symptoms whose illness merges with man. Literature then appears as a measure of health: not that the writer would necessarily be in good health [. . .], but he possesses an irresistible and delicate health that stems from what he has seen and heard of things too big for him, too strong for him, suffocating things whose passage exhausts him, while nonetheless giving him the becoming that a dominant and substantial health would render impossible. The writer returns from what he has seen and heard with bloodshot eyes and pierced eardrums. (3)

To fuse the clinical aesthetic of painting with that of literature: the distortion of language that brings it into contact with its own outside allows *sensation* to pass through language; it creates delirious, extra-linguistic Figures or Words with a certain powerful immediacy that asserts itself in or through language. It reconstitutes the word as a visual and acoustic object, and reconstitutes the body as, following Benn, a grasping brain entirely attuned to the sensation of words.

Through this detour into Deleuzian aesthetics, I want to borrow a general structure or logic of aesthetic experience predicated on the immediacy (sensation) and

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<sup>46</sup> Like Foucault, Deleuze also associates these sensations at the limit of clinical-aesthetic-bodily experience with the “night.” In *Francis Bacon* he writes: “We can seek the unity of rhythm only at the point where rhythm itself plunges into chaos, into the night, at the point where the differences of level are perpetually and violently mixed” (39).

on the “representation” of that immediacy in a syntactic Figure, that is, in a delirious writing. I am also interested in a mode of reading that attends closely to the distortions of the Figure (which, according to the logic of sensation, are necessarily distortions of the writer and the reader or spectator) in order to reconstruct the extreme experience of sensation that is transmitted in reading. For Deleuze, it is crucial that the Figure emerge between two poles of painting: neither figurative (representational), nor totally abstract, the Figure still strives for a fixed form, but is constituted by the series of detours and distortions that interrupt its formation. Likewise, Worringer’s art historical concepts, Rilke’s *Aufzeichnungen* and Benn’s “Gehirne” cannot be contained within a realist, representational aesthetic, nor have they attained a completely abstract, expressive style. The writers are moving from the former to the latter, and their texts are characterized by the oscillation between those two poles.

I call my own method of reading in this dissertation a phenomenology of verbal sensation, a method that describes the experience of reading texts in which individual words erupt out of the structures of syntax and meaning, demanding to be read as isolated verbal-visual-acoustic elements. The elemental word, semantically and grammatically “flattened” as it were, represents the surface of language and demands a close-sighted, haptic reading to attend to the sensation it enacts. Such texts (try to) suspend syntax, grammar, meaning, and temporality, all of which create the illusion of “depth” in language: an organization of semantic and linguistic space according to the temporal process of understanding.<sup>47</sup> The stylistic unity of the texts of Rilke and Benn that I read, and the deep background connection between them and an entire aesthetic and poetic discourse of their time, is their pursuit of verbal sensation, their attempt,

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<sup>47</sup> Although I am here describing these two dimensions in language in visual terms, the fundamental structure is no different than the Saussurian distinction between the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of linguistic signification, represented respectively by the paradigm and the syntagm. See pp. 122 and following in Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*. Ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with Albert Riedlinger. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1959.

following the example of the visual arts and art-history named by Worringer's concept of Gothic expression, to produce or to describe a pure relation to the word without the unnecessary "depth" of grammar, meaning, and temporality.

But I must insist that it is not a matter of pure verbal abstraction in the example of, say, a Dada sound poem, a nonsense poem of Christian Morgenstern, or a Surrealist experiment in automatic writing. As aesthetic discourses, Dada and Surrealism can be seen as emerging out of—yet distinct from—the discourse I describe here in the following way: Dada takes the formal and material distortions of the Expressionist poetics of to a different level by intensifying, de-romanticizing and politicizing them.<sup>48</sup> Surrealism develops out of Expressionism by explicitly locating the source of aesthetic expressive force in the (Freudian) unconscious and describing a psychic and poetic technique of liberating that expressive power.<sup>49</sup> But to give a more concrete example, I follow a passage Helmut Lethen's recent biography of Benn, where he makes an important distinction between Benn's poetry and the concept of "absolute Poesie." In discussing Carl Einstein's review of the 1927 publication of Benn's *Gesammelte Gedichte*, Lethen shows how Einstein's praise of Benn (which Benn himself seems to have accepted as accurate) may only be true to a point. Lethen writes: "Puristisch stellt [Einstein] Kriterien 'absoluter Wortkunst' auf, die nichts weiter als 'durch keine Wirklichkeit vorbestimmtes Sprachspiel' sind, und glaubt sie

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<sup>48</sup> See Hugo Ball's "Manifest zum 1. Dada-Abend in Zürich 1916" reprinted in Best (ed) *Theorie des Expressionismus*. For example, "Jede Sache hat ihr Wort; da ist das Wort selber zur Sache geworden. Warum kann der Baum nicht Plupusch heißen, und Pluplubasch, wenn es geregnet hat? Und warum muß er überhaupt etwas heißen? Müssen wir denn überall unseren Mund dran hängen? Das Wort, das Wort, das Weh gerade an diesem Ort, das Wort, meine Herren, ist eine öffentliche Angelegenheit ersten Ranges" (236). One could hardly imagine the humor and phonetic and onomatopoeic playfulness of such a passage in a text of Benn or Rilke.

<sup>49</sup> See André Breton's well-known definition of Surrealism from his 1924 manifesto: "*SURREALISM, n.* Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern" (26). In *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969.

in vollkommener Reinheit in Benn Lyrik verwirklicht” (86), but Lethen goes on to suggest that Benn’s poetry does *not* in fact fulfill the criteria for absolute, autonomous poetry.<sup>50</sup> For Lethen, reality is still there in Benn’s poetry. Benn proceeds from semantic, social and historical contexts, even if the words that he wrenches out of them are to be *almost* unrecognizably transformed. This distinction keeps Benn’s poetics of the word apart from a purely autonomous verbal aesthetic of Dadaism and within the general poetic discourse of Expressionism that I describe here (though Benn, in theory and practice, goes well beyond the efforts of the writers of the so-called “Expressionist decade,” 1910-20).

Benn and Rilke, I argue, do not want a pure materiality of the signifier, or a pure autonomy of expression. Rather than going beyond that dimension of language, they want to go to *the* outside *of* that dimension, the exteriority that is neither within it, nor dialectically beyond it, but rather nevertheless still proper to it. That stylistic expression is what I call delirium. The term is at once historically indebted to the artistic and art-historical discourse of expression and haptic vision (a discourse both coalesced and propagated by Wilhelm Worringer in [and in the wake of] *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*) and conceptually indebted to Foucault’s reflections on “thought from outside” and “Unreason.” The suspension and dispersion of language that Foucault theorizes is analogous to the suspension of linguistic “depth” *via* delirious writing in the texts of Worringer, Rilke and Benn that I bring together here.

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<sup>50</sup> Lethen’s distinction is a valid one, though he perhaps attributes a position to Einstein that is not entirely there in Einstein’s original piece. In Chapters 1 and 4, I cite specific passages from Einstein’s text which suggest that Einstein himself had a more nuanced and specific conception of Benn’s poetic language than Lethen suggests here. For an account of the friendship between Benn and Einstein, see J. Siemon’s “Einstein und Benn: Geschichte einer Entfernung?” In *Carl-Einstein-Kolloquium*. Ed. K. H. Kiefer. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1994, 89-104. For their specific interaction in wartime Belgium, see Hubert Roland, *Die deutsche literarische “Kriegskolonie” in Belgien, 1914-1918. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutsch-belgischen Literaturbeziehungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1999. I owe the reference to Siemon’s article to Roland.

## Part IV: Other Critical Approaches to the Problematic of Reading Delirium

The first writer to use Worringer's ideas for literary criticism (even before Benn suggested it) was Joseph Frank, who, in an essay originally published in 1945 entitled "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," argues that modernist literature is characterized by a suppression of temporality in favor of a purely spatial form of composition.<sup>51</sup> Making use of Worringer's categories of abstract and empathetic art, as well the concept of artistic volition (*Kunstwollen*), Frank argues that modernist literature is written according to spatial principles of contiguity and fragmentation (and therefore *abstraction*), not according to the organic, continuous (and *empathetic*) principle of time.<sup>52</sup> What is of immediate interest to my argument is Frank's presupposition that the literary suppression of temporality necessitates a "unified spatial apprehension." Just because a novel like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) represents continuous time in a series of fragments, or conversely, represents disparate temporalities in one contiguous narrative line, this does not necessarily entail a "unified *spatial* apprehension" on the part of the reader (19, emphasis added JD). In other words, simply because literature makes a montage of the temporality of its presentation is not a sufficient reason for insisting on its spatial form. For a counter example, consider Wolfgang Iser's argument in his essay "Interaction between Text

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<sup>51</sup> See a revised version reprinted on pp. 3-62 of Frank's *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of the (temporal) understanding of "spatial form," see especially William Holdheim's: "Wilhelm Worringer and the Polarity of Understanding" and Joseph A. Buttigieg's "Worringer among the Modernists" in *Boundary 2*, Vol. 8, No. 1, The Problems of Reading in Contemporary American Criticism: A Symposium (Autumn, 1979), pp. 339-358 and pp. 359-66. See also William V. Spanos' "Modern Literary Criticism and the Spatialization of Time: An Existential Critique" in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 29, No. 1. (Autumn, 1970), pp. 87-104. For more on the reception of Frank's essay, see Geoff Waite's article "Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*: Remarks on its Reception and on the Rhetoric of its Criticism" in *Invisible Cathedrals: The Expressionist Art History of Wilhelm Worringer*. Ed. Neil Donahue. Penn State University Press, 1995. 13-40.

and Reader” where he argues that every reader situates a text within a “field of vision” and explores the text as a kind of spatial form from a “wandering viewpoint” (113-4).<sup>53</sup> The reader’s viewpoint wanders back and forth between a foreground of explicit meaning and a background of implied meaning. Hence what drives the reading forward is precisely the wandering of the reader’s gaze, the visual scrutiny that unfolds in time as the vague background of unstated meaning eventually comes into the foreground of explicit meaning. Iser uses a spatial metaphor to understand the temporal process of implying, suspending and finally revealing meaning in a novel in much the same way that Frank uses spatial form to discuss the temporal discontinuity of a modernist text like *Ulysses*. However, all of Iser’s examples in the article derive from Jane Austen’s prose. The point here is that Frank’s argument (that modernist prose strives toward spatial form through the suppression of temporality) does not suggest a different kind of *readerly* experience (in terms of temporal suspension) from that of the most conventional of 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction. I would take Frank’s argument one step further toward a “haptic reading” of spatial form, namely the process of attending to the sequence of verbal sensations that radiate outward from words as they simultaneously burst forth and dissolve back into the structures of meaning and temporality inherent to language. This would make Frank’s argument, which is already compelling at the thematic and conceptual level, more useful as an analytical tool for reading the style of the texts in question.

Another critic who takes Frank’s one step further is Neil Donahue. His study *Form of Disruption* (1993) is a sustained attempt to appropriate Frank’s concept of spatial form toward a visually inflected theory of literary abstraction for German

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<sup>53</sup> In the collection *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. Ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.



Expressionism.<sup>54</sup> Donahue argues that “the prose of this period strives essentially to resemble the visual arts” (vii), and uses Worringer’s aesthetics (via Frank’s essay) as both the historical glue and the analytical reference for his close readings of the “spatial form” of, among many crucial texts of German modernism, Rilke’s

*Aufzeichnungen* and Benn’s “Gehirne.” He locates spatial form first of all on:

[. . .] the immediate textual level, as the *arrangement* of words on the page, that is, in the visual and typographical dimension as parataxis in greater or lesser degrees of disjunction; and second, on the level of overall coherence of a work, the *organization* of material against the temporal imperative of narrative according to principles of recurrence or varied repetition, as in the leitmotiv. Or we might say that spatial form reveals itself in terms of a work’s style and overall construction. (10)

Donahue translates Worringer’s concept of visual abstraction quite literally: the work of (visual) art gratifies the need for abstraction by reducing itself to pure geometric lines on a flat surface, thus abstracting itself from the caprice and chaos of spatial existence. Thus the literary work, in order to provide a similar abstract release, needs to suppress its inherent medial element: not space, but time. Therefore, all the temporally articulating, story-telling, depth-creating functions of narrative language are to be suppressed in favor of terse, paratactic, a-temporal language that is to be regarded as “spatial.” Although this proves a fruitful point of departure for Donahue’s close readings, I wish to raise two objections. First: in crudely Worringerian terms, abstraction is supposed to gratify a need for abstraction, to provide an aesthetic release from the chaos and terror of existence. But the reading of “abstract” literature (e. g., the *Aufzeichnungen* or Benn’s prose) provides the very opposite of release: such literature reflects, if not exaggerates, the existential and psychological unease that give rises to it. It is, at least, not exactly gratifying, not exactly a clarification of the obscurity of existence. For a counterexample, consider Erich Auerbach’s famous

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<sup>54</sup> See Neil Donahue’s discussion of Benn in *Forms of Disruption: Abstraction in Modern German Prose*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

comparison of the rich syntax of Homeric language and the terse parataxis of Biblical language in the opening chapter of *Mimesis* (1946).<sup>55</sup> The suppression of temporality, terse style, and lack of explicit connections between events of the Biblical narrative give rise to tension, suspense, narrative depth and an almost Worringerian-sounding need for interpretation (“Deutungsbedürfnis”). In contrast, the rich syntax of Homeric language, which fills in every detail and seamlessly articulates different temporal moments in a perpetually present fullness of narration, presents in itself the pleasure of entering a fuller world. Parataxis, as Auerbach would have it, seems to create precisely the experience from which, in Worringerian terms, it is supposed to be the escape. In any case, I suggest that the experience of reading “spatial form” only intensifies the existential confusion it should resolve. Donahue takes Worringer too much at face value and does not emphasize enough the contradictions at play in his concept of abstraction (which, as I show in Chapter 2, is always tinged with the hyperbolically escalating force of expression). Indeed, I argue that Worringer’s main contribution to the history of style and to the aesthetic and poetic discourses of his time is *not* a theory of abstraction, but the Gothic line. Whereas abstraction, as a drive and as a style, is complete and total, the Gothic is restless, incomplete, delirious. The Deleuzian Worringer, I suggest, is more accurate than the Worringer of Frank and Donahue.

A second objection to the analogy of spatial form to literature is that it only takes into account one dimension of literary language, namely, syntax (or more specifically its breakdown as parataxis<sup>56</sup>). But one could also analyze such a breakdown of syntax in terms of the word, a redefinition of the power of the word, which in turns breaks down the laws of syntax and creates a style that Donahue calls

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<sup>55</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Die dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendlandischen Literatur*. 9th Edition. Tübingen and Basel: Francke Verlag, 1994.

<sup>56</sup> Donahue nevertheless offers a productive analysis of Benn’s syntax at the end of “Gehirne.” See especially pp. 177-8 in *Forms of Disruption*.

abstract, but that I call delirious. But to make the analogy to the visual arts more complete and to prove more fully the thesis that “the prose of this period strives essentially to resemble the visual arts” (vii), one would need to connect *all* the fundamental units of visual representation to the units of linguistic representation. This, I suggest, would mean mapping color, line/contour and figure onto word, syntax and (grammatical) person, respectively. Color is, as it were, the word of the visual image; lines/contours represent the articulation and demarcation of colors in the same way that syntax combines words into larger structures or patterns; and the figure as the highest integration and organizing force of color and line, is analogous to the grammatical person of language as the agent (speaker, writer, listener, reader) that fundamentally underlies it. I am here interested in the modes of experimental writing that re-conceive each of these fundamental units and the totality of their interaction. In literary terms, purely verbal experimentation would remind one of the work of James Joyce. August Stramm’s poetry could be thought of as a poetry that strives solely for the suppression of syntax, whereas Kafka’s prose (especially in the case of *Das Schloss*, famously rewritten from first to third person) could be seen as a conscious intensification of the ambiguity of grammatical person. But, to my mind, Rilke’s *Aufzeichnungen* and Benn’s “Gehirne” interrogate all three of these basic literary dimensions through the figures of their protagonists: the “ich,” however distorted and ex-pressed by his language, provides the necessary tension for their poetic experimentation. Thus the “ich” of Rilke and Benn, is analogous to the Figure (in Deleuze’s sense), as the point of aesthetic contact that makes sensation possible and, in this case, *legible* as delirium.

The legibility of such texts becomes a problem in Friedrich Kittler’s account of the literature of this period in his *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (1985).<sup>57</sup> However,

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<sup>57</sup> Kittler, Friedrich A. *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens.

Kittler is not interested in legibility as part of a hermeneutic process of reading and understanding the meaning of texts; rather, for him, legibility is a matter of the transcription and decoding of information in the discourse network of 1900, with literature being reduced merely to one self-reflective discourse among others (e.g., psychophysics and psychoanalysis) and written language being reduced to one linguistic medium among others (e.g., the phonograph, the radio). Writers around 1900 have cast off meaning and any connection to “nature” or “soul” and instead merely follow the example of the natural sciences and media technology and transcribe their cerebral engrams into written form, often to the point of madness. Indeed, Kittler defines literature around 1900 as “a simulacrum of madness,” with the writings-down of Rilke’s *Malte* and Benn’s *Rönne* as the prime examples of delirious writing.<sup>58</sup> Here it goes without saying for Kittler that the notions of a creative human subject or of artistic agency simply fall away according to the discourse of literature around 1900. Writers like Benn and Rilke are compelled like machines to transcribe their texts not from their thoughts and experiences, but from a pre-given verbal matrix in the brain that dictates words to the writing hand automatically. Kittler does not have to make any historical claims about why such a delirious style comes about because “[l]iterary writing is its own justification precisely in its empty self-referentiality” (304). Hence Kittler’s summary remark that *Rönne*’s “literary impulses are to be fed on the vivisected fruit of his own brain. That is why the hero procures himself a journal and a pencil” (314), or his equally terse commentary on *Malte*’s practice of *Aufzeichnen*: “Writing therefore means: to put the exploded ‘inner-world space,’ the tumescent brain, down on paper, rather than have the explosion or tumor treated by the appropriate scientific methods” (319). Writing is nothing more than a material process,

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Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

<sup>58</sup> See pp. 304-46, “A Simulacrum of Madness.”

and literature is the discourse that literalizes its materiality to a delirious extreme.

Yet, as I show in my discussions of Malte and Rönne, both Rilke and Benn were still very much interested in creativity and artistic agency as constitutive problems of their work (the *ich* that, however distorted or problematic, like Bacon's Figures, cannot be abandoned). I insist that the more accurate and productive way to approach the "simulacrum of madness" is to examine the dynamic interaction of agency and loss/surrender of agency as it is played out in the delirious language of the texts, in their words and their style.<sup>59</sup> By adopting the agentless and anti-artistic model of a discourse network, Kittler forfeits his ability to describe literary language around 1900 with any specificity. In this sense he belies an important aspect of his Foucauldian roots. Consider David Wellbery's comment in the foreword to the English translation of Kittler's work:

[Kittler] practices what Foucault, in an early essay on Maurice Blanchot, called the 'thinking of the outside,' the thinking of language as a domain recalcitrant to internalization. Later in his career, Foucault named this domain 'discourse' and set out to develop a lexicon of exteriority—series, event, discontinuity, materiality—with which to describe it. Kittler's discourse analysis follows the Foucauldian lead in that it seeks to delineate the apparatuses of power, storage, transmission, training, reproduction, and so forth that make up the conditions of factual discursive occurrences. The object of study is not what is said or written but the fact—the brute and often brutal fact—that it is said, that this and not rather something else is inscribed. (xxi)

I would argue that, for Foucault, it was not simply a matter of renaming the same domain and proceeding with the busy-work of discursive description. As we have already seen, this was a major shift for Foucault, who insisted on a distinction between his earlier "phenomenological" approach (which by 1970 he explicitly rejects) and his more properly "discursive" or "archaeological" one. By appropriating only the latter Foucault in his work (as Wellbery seems to suggest here), Kittler loses the earlier

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<sup>59</sup> On this point Moritz Baßler has a more compelling reading. See his discussion of "die Aporie des setzenden Ichs" in *Die Entdeckung der Textur: Unverständlichkeit in der Kurzprosa der emphatischen Moderne 1910-1916*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1994. p. 79 and ff.

Foucault's attention to the productivity of literary language and its complex interplay with artistic subjectivity, and I argue that it is precisely these aspects of language that are essential to reconstructing a literary discourse and to understanding in particular the delirium of literature around 1900.

Another way in which I would distinguish my approach to Benn and Rilke from Kittler's is through the implicit Lacanianism of his conception of media. Kittler writes:

A writing without the writer, then, records the impossible reality at the basis of all media: white noise, primal sound. This is only logical. Certainly "it" has been making noise from time immemorial, as long as there has been Brownian motion. But for any distinction between noise and information to be possible, *the real* must be able to move through technological channels. (316-7, emphasis added JD)

While it may be a technological fact that the medial transmission of information produces a certain amount of friction or noise, Kittler often (and particularly in his discussion of "das Große" in Rilke's *Aufzeichnungen*) links that background noise to the Lacanian real. Consider the juxtaposition of the following two sentences in Kittler's account of Malte's encounter with the Big Thing: "What appears [i.e., the Big Thing] is something real that cannot be spoken in any language because the very act of introducing it into language filters it out" and "The law governing delirium and hallucination determines that what has not entered the daylight of the symbolic appears in the real" (318). The media-theoretical language merges seamlessly with Lacanian terminology to imbue all medial transmission with the tinge of a traumatic real that resists, but at the same time demands symbolic representation. Hence the compulsion of all writers around 1900 to write down the "primal soup of brain physiology" since that is the paradoxically immediate experience of their own medial constitution and the traumatic kernel of their subjectivity, such as it is. Yet I show that the paradox of writing-down an immediate experience is not only a feature of the

mediality of transcription, but also an aesthetic and poetic problem. When a discourse sets as the goal of literary production not the mediated representation of reality, but rather the paradoxical immediacy of an experience or sensation of language in writing or reading, then the paradox of that immediacy is more than just the traumatic real that lies at the essence of any transcription, of any representation. Rather, that paradox is a concrete and historically determined aesthetic problem that constitutes and is constituted by the texts which try to solve it. And I argue that, in the discourses in which Worringer, Rilke and Benn participate (the discourses of Expressionism, of abstraction, of haptic vision and verbal sensation) that the paradox of verbal sensation is conceived primarily in a visual sense. The compelling paradox of delirious writing is more than just a problem of medial transcription, it is the double problem of establishing in literary language a relation to the word that is abstract and haptic, and likewise the problem of reading such a relation.

Thomas Anz's 1977 study *Literatur der Existenz* approaches the problem of a delirious literary discourse in the early 20th century through the social and literary category of psychopathography.<sup>60</sup> He historicizes the existential *Angst* and alienation as the particular *Befindlichkeit* of Expressionist writers around 1910 (but *not* during the war) and shows how that *Befindlichkeit* mirrors itself in the literature of the time as a whole vocabulary of alienation, fear, and paralysis as well as spatial metaphors of enclosure and imprisonment reflecting the isolation of the writer in the modern metropolis. He offers an exhaustive catalogue of the Expressionist writers of the period, particularly Heym, Stadler, Trakl and von Hoddiss, as well as major figures like Musil, Thomas Mann, Rilke and Döblin. But what emerges as the central methodological idea of Anz's text is a kind of *Verspiegelungstheorie* that uses

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<sup>60</sup> See Thomas Anz, *Literatur der Existenz: Psychopathographie und ihrer soziale Bedeutung im Frühexpressionismus*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1977.

existential vocabulary to show how Expressionist literature reflects a concrete social reality, an empirical psychological experience. Madness or delirium, in Anz's text, are ultimately only metaphors for a social experience that remains firmly situated outside the text and in the historical reality of the time. I am rather interested in how the literary text *is* the delirium that it represents through the experience of reading it. Hence my emphasis on verbal sensation as both a category of reading and of literary discourse, as opposed to *Psychopathographie*, which remains on the side of a discursive approach.

Moritz Baßler, in *Die Entdeckung der Textur: Unverständlichkeit in der Kurzprosa der emphatischen Moderne 1910-1916*, approaches the literature of this period from a post- or anti-hermeneutic perspective. However, unlike the post-hermeneutic approach of Kittler, his focus remains on the experience of the reading process rather than the construction of a discursive network. Baßler elaborates a model of reading texts from this period on the presupposition that their constitutive stylistic feature is illegibility or incomprehensibility (*Unverständlichkeit*). For Baßler, *Unverständlichkeit* grounds a historical moment in German short prose writing from 1910-1916 (what he calls “das emphatische Moderne” in contrast to “klassische Moderne”), characterized by texts that block the integration of their parts into a whole accessible to hermeneutic understanding. Such a text abandons structure in favor of what Baßler calls *Textur*: there is no longer a summarizable, paraphrasable core to the writing, rather only a material/formal texture of language, which both exceeds hermeneutic understanding and forces a re-conception of it.<sup>61</sup> This gives rise to what Baßler, on p. 79 and following, calls “die Aporie des setzenden Ich,” a paradox of

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<sup>61</sup> Baßler defines texture as “Ein Vermeiden von Strukturen“ and relates it to incomprehensibility as follows: “ein Blockieren von hermeneutischem Verstehen, paradigmatischer Übertragbarkeit, und bildhafter Vorstellbarkeit, führt zur Unverständlichkeit eines Textes, weil es die gewöhnliche Lektüre unterläuft und die Werkzeuge traditioneller Interpretation nutzlos macht” (15).



agency in which the writer must be at once the active producer of language and the passive conduit of an irrational, primal reality that speaks through him and inscribes itself into his incomprehensible prose. These aporia brings about for Baßler a direct contact between writing and madness, which he contrasts specifically to Kittler's notion of the simulacrum of delirium. For Baßler, madness is neither a symptom, nor a mimetic (Anz) or simulated (Kittler) style; rather it is *the* textual principle of the writing of precisely such an aporetic subject, as, according to Baßler, so many writers of the *emphatische Moderne* are (including Einstein and Benn).

My approach could be distinguished from Baßler's in two ways. First, his approach, which he calls anti-hermeneutic, nevertheless still operates according to a kind of hermeneutic logic. To explain how a text is understood as an unfolding of meaning is in some fundamental ways no different than explaining how is misunderstood as an unfolding of meaninglessness. My emphasis on verbal sensation, on the visual aspects of a "textured" or delirious text, provides a way of reading such a text with some specificity for its particular style and rhythm, rather than subsuming it, however implicitly, to a general logic of (mis)understanding. Moreover, my approach situates the phenomenon of *Textur* within the broader aesthetic discourse of Expressionism (one that can include Rilke as well), rather than the more narrowly circumscribed literary and programmatic discourse of experimental prose writers that Baßler has in mind. And my approach encompasses poetry in addition to prose, whereas Baßler scrupulously avoids poetry and what he calls the "lyricisms" that can sometimes interrupt the proper *Textur* of prose writing. From my perspective, the stylistic phenomenon of delirium that I describe in Rilke and Benn's prose writing can be found in their poetry as well. In Chapter 1, I juxtapose two poems of Rilke and Benn in order to begin to read the delirium, for which I have here outlined a theoretical background, discursive periodization and methodological approach.

## CHAPTER 1

### WORD AS METAPHOR, WORD AS SENSATION: RILKE'S "DER LESENDE" AND BENN'S "STAATSBIBLIOTHEK"

Deleuze's formulation of sensation as a non-cerebral and ambivalent experience (as health and sickness, rhythm and chaos, expansion and contraction, possibility and risk) speaks to the problem I want to analyze and generates positive terms for the analysis. In the chapters that follow, I show how delirium can be *read*, that is, how it becomes part of a logic of sensation, a delirious style, and how that style belongs to the larger confrontation of modern movements in art and literature with the problem of visual and verbal immediacy. In this chapter, I juxtapose two poems (one by Rilke from 1901, one by Benn from 1925) that both describe and perform a certain experience of reading. The contrast between the two poems reveals a double shift in poetic language (1) away from a temporal unfolding of meaning in and around words as reliable figurations of that meaning; and (2) toward a poetics of verbal sensation in which words are presented in a haptic syntax to the reader, subverting through the immediacy of their expression the referentiality of language and the distinction between literary and metaphorical registers.

The first poem, Rilke's "Der Lesende" (1901) stages a scene of delirium, the breakdown of the reading process that is also a breakdown of the reading self.<sup>62</sup> But the language of the poem, through the trope of chiasmus and, implicitly, through the affirmation of the stability and meaningfulness of metaphorical language itself,

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<sup>62</sup> "Der Lesende," from Rilke's *Das Buch der Bilder* (*Werke* 1, 457-8) dates from 1901, during Rilke's stay in Worpswede and Westerwede. My analysis here thus anticipates the discussion of the *Worpswede* monograph (1902) in Chapter 3.

reverses and heals the reader's delirium. As an allegory of reading, or more precisely, an allegory of delirium, the text depicts the power of metaphorical language to overcome the excessive literalness of delirium, restoring the coherence of the self and the totality of the world. The second pole of delirium is represented by Benn's "Staatsbibliothek" (1925), not so much an allegory of reading as an allegory of non-reading in which the poet both states and performs a new mode of encountering words on the page. Benn's poem explicitly undermines the poetic power of metaphor, insisting instead on a new literal or verbal poetics in which the literary text is radically closed in on itself: the poem is now a verbal and visual object at once, with its ghostly rhyme and rhythm further severing the connection to a real or referential world and keeping the reader's attention focused on the words themselves. There is thus the idea of a poetic language that has renounced both the metaphorical and referential function altogether and works with words as its only, absolute objects: the primary positing of words which capture and release an instant of poetic power. The texts of Rilke and Benn (and, *mutatis mutandis*, of Worringer) that I analyze in chapters 2 through 4 represent the oscillation or vacillation between these two poles, blending the binaries between the literal and metaphorical, the material and the textual, the outer world and the inner self into some third thing. This third thing is not exactly beyond or outside linguistic expression, but, to say it again with Deleuze and Foucault, presents the outside *of* language, the exteriority of language *within* language. It is thus a mode of writing that is constantly at odds with itself, overcoming and undermining itself in the same gesture of writing (the gesture of writing down for Malte, the gesture of pulling apart the brain for Benn's Rönne). To read this kind of writing is what I call reading delirium.

## Part I: Rilke's Allegory of Delirium: "Der Lesende" (1901)

Rilke's poem "Der Lesende" introduces one aspect of the polarity of reading delirium. The poem depends, as so many of Rilke's early poems do, on the figure of reversal, of chiasmus.<sup>63</sup> The poem narrates how the reading of a text (the gathering of meaning from the furrows of writing on the page) is reversed and transformed into the scattering of meaning outwards onto the landscape. The balanced totality that the reader expects to receive from the book (the union of inside and outside, of self and world, of earth and sky) is disrupted by the experience of reading itself, which produces only congestion, chaos, and darkness: the literal unraveling of textuality by the dim light of the setting sun. But as the reader raises his eyes from the book, he sees all around him the signs of the meaningful totality that he expected to find in the book. The images of textual obscurity, congestion, and disintegration are now reversed into images of clarity, distance and order, into which the reader, through his now-knowing glances, is closely interwoven. The poem concludes with a metaphor, an as-if union of heaven and earth that brings full resolution to its reversal, suggesting that reading itself is only a metaphor for a more profound and utterly non-linguistic insight.

### Der Lesende

Ich las schon lang. Seit dieser Nachmittag,  
mit Regen rauschend, an den Fenstern lag.  
Vom Winde drauen hrte ich nichts mehr:  
mein Buch war schwer.  
Ich sah ihm in die Bltter wie in Mienen,  
die dunkel werden von Nachdenklichkeit,  
und um mein Lesen staute sich die Zeit. –

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<sup>63</sup> Paul de Man discusses chiasmus in Rilke's poetry in "Tropes (Rilke)," the second chapter of *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979. He writes, "The determining figure of Rilke's poetry is that of chiasmus, the crossing that reverses the attributes of words and things. The poems are composed of entities, objects and subjects, who themselves behave like words, which "play" at language according to the rules of rhetoric as one plays ball according to the rules of the game" (38). I discuss further de Man's argument on the figurality of Rilke's poetic language in Chapter 3 by placing it in the context of his prose writings (*Worpswede* and *Malte*), which respectively present and undermine an explicit theory of metaphor. The theory of metaphor that emerges from these prose texts is, I argue, also central to understanding Rilke's poetic language, particularly the renunciation of referentiality through figurality that de Man reads in Rilke's poetry.

Auf einmal sind die Seiten überschienen,  
und statt der bangen Wortverworrenheit  
steht: Abend, Abend. . . überall auf ihnen.  
Ich schau noch nicht hinaus, und doch zerreißen  
die langen Zeilen, und die Worte rollen  
von ihren Fäden fort, wohin sie wollen. . .  
Da weiß ich es: über den übervollen  
glänzenden Gärten sind die Himmel weit;  
die Sonne hat noch einmal kommen sollen. –  
Und jetzt wird Sommernacht, so weit man sieht:  
zu wenig Gruppen stellt sich das Verstreute,  
dunkel, auf langen Wegen gehn die Leute,  
und seltsam weit, als ob es mehr bedeute,  
hört man das Wenige, das noch geschieht.

Und wenn ich jetzt vom Buch die Augen hebe,  
wird nichts befremdlich sein und alles groß.  
Dort draußen ist, was ich hier drinnen lebe,  
und hier und dort ist alles grenzenlos;  
nur daß ich mich noch mehr damit verwebe,  
wenn meine Blicke an die Dinge passen  
und an die ernste Einfachheit der Massen, –  
da wächst die Erde über sich hinaus.  
Den ganzen Himmel scheint sie zu umfassen:  
der erste Stern ist wie das letzte Haus.

[The Reader<sup>64</sup>

I'd long been reading. Since with rush of rain  
this afternoon first dimmed the window-pane.  
The wind outside had passed from my regard:  
my book was hard.  
And, as I turned its pages, I would con them  
like features darkened by reflectiveness;  
time's flow was stemmed around my studiousness.  
Then of a sudden something overshadowed them,  
and, ousting anxious verbal mazziness,  
stood: Evening, Evening. . . everywhere upon them.  
I do not yet look out, but the long lines  
have split in two, and words from their combining  
threads roll away wherever they're inclining. . .  
And then I know: above the serpentining,

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<sup>64</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke. *Selected Works. Volume II, Poetry*. Trans. J. B. Leishman. London: Hogarth Press, 1976, p. 136.

glittering gardens there's a spaciousness;  
yes, once again the sun must have been shining.  
Now summer night is all encompassing:  
Small groups are formed by what lay scatteredly,  
people on long walks wander darksomenly,  
and strangely far, as though more meaningfully,  
is heard the little that's still happening.

And when I gaze up now from what I've read,  
everything's great and nothing's unakin.  
Out there exists what I live here within,  
and here and there it's all unlimited;  
save that I weave myself still more therein  
when on to outward things my glances fly  
and gravely simple masses formed thereby, –  
there far beyond itself the earth's outswelling.  
It seems to be embracing all the sky,  
and the first star is like the farthest dwelling.]

The first four lines of the poem set up an opposition between the inside and the outside. The inside is the space of reading, of seeing, and of the heavy book (*schwer* in the sense of *Schwerkraft*, the gravity of the book as a pull inwards toward a center<sup>65</sup>). Temporality (the afternoon), changeability (of the weather), and sound (wind and rain) are relegated to the space outside the window. The emphatic monosyllabic sentences “Ich las schon lang” and “mein Buch war schwer” (the latter emphatically taking up an entire line) bracket the description of the outside space, making an almost visual border in the structure of the verse. The outside space is described only insofar as its noisy turbulence is sealed off from the plodding, monosyllabic slowness of reading.

Reading the book is depicted as a kind of *looking*: the poet looks into the book's pages as into the expression of a dark, pensive face (“ich sah ihm in die Blätter wie in Mienen, / die dunkel werden von Nachdenklichkeit”). This is an almost specular image: the reader's face must have grown dark from his thoughtfulness, and he reads the book as if looking at his own reflection. Reading is thus both looking and

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<sup>65</sup> See Rilke's 1924 poem “Schwerkraft” (2: 179).

introspection, both of which take place outside of the normal passage of time: “und um mein Lesen staute sich die Zeit.-” Since daily time and meteorological transience have been placed outside the scene of reading, reading itself is experienced as a congestion of time. But time does not simply slow or stop, rather it accumulates in a specifically negative sense of the word: not accumulation as growth or construction, but as amassing, congestion, the slowing-down of a fluidity that should otherwise remain in motion. If reading itself (*lesen*) is, at least etymologically, a gathering from the page, the language of the poem suggests that reading cannot gather from the page, but gathers time around the page in the negative sense of a stoppage or clogging that will, at some point, have to burst or break.

That break comes in the form of the word “Abend, Abend” and the sudden shift to the present tense: evening, as the irruption of the stalled and exteriorized temporality of reading, shines over the pages with its fading light, and instead of the narrow, fearful confusion of words (“der bangen Wortverworrenheit”), the reader sees time itself as an absence of light. But as he continues to hold his gaze on the pages, still awaiting some kind of illumination despite the increasing obscurity, the lines of the text tear themselves to pieces, and the words, torn loose from the threads that bind them, roll forth wherever they want. The enjambment of these lines verbally depicts the textual unraveling as the sentences are torn apart by the end of a verse. The word itself *zerreißen* (the only end-word in the poem without a rhyming counterpart) makes a tear in the loose, but consistent rhyming of the poem. The image of rolling words works in direct opposition to the heaviness of the book: the book should have its own center of gravity, its *Schwerpunkt*, but if each of these words has begun to roll, then each is now turning on its own center of gravity, dispersing the book’s centering weight in all directions. The book cannot even be named anymore: that which is first named as a book gradually dissolves itself into pages, lines and finally individual

words: according to this movement, the parts monstrously usurp the totality of the whole. The violence of this language is also a very specifically self-reflexive violence: as the text itself unravels, the primal metaphor of text (as weaving) is decomposed: if reading is not gathering (but a rhythm of stoppage and dispersion), and if the text is not woven (but a chaos of threads and a jumble of words), then language itself is being undermined by a new set of images that rewrite its very roots. Moreover, if the book is a specular image of the reader, then it is the reader himself who is also somehow subjected to this violent dispersing movement, reduced, like his language, to a scattering of points (ellipsis), saying nothing except their inability to say: “und die Worte rollen / von ihren Fäden fort, wohin sie wollen. . .”<sup>66</sup>

This is the moment of delirium in the text. Reading, as a word, a signifier, and an activity of visual perception and linguistic understanding is taken to its own outside and reconstituted as the scattering of disintegrated, autonomous words that escape the gravitational pull of syntax and typography. To read this delirium means to trace and question the process that subverts and destabilizes textual meaning and brings the language to this point of chaotic collapse, this limit of legibility, in the conventional and etymological sense of the word. But in the case of this particular poem, we can only read Rilke’s delirium so far. Because for now this delirium can still be turned around, restored to a proper form of legibility by a language that lets in an initial tremor of delirium only to reassert a firmer grasp.

Still not having looked up out of the book, the reader imagines the space outside, and suddenly knows how distant the heavens are from the overfull, gleaming gardens: these two lines introduce two nuances to the system of oppositions that

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<sup>66</sup> Foucault’s essay “The Thought from Outside” describes the simultaneous scattering of language and dissolution of the subject (i.e. the movement to the outside of language) with the same undoing of the metaphor of textuality: “When language arrives at its own edge, what it finds is not a positivity that contradicts it, but the void that will efface it. Into that void it must go, consenting to come undone in the rumbling, in the immediate negation of what it says, in a silence that is not the intimacy of a secret but a pure outside where *words endlessly unravel*.” (“Thought” 152 [emphasis added JD])



structure the poem: in addition to inside/outside, the poem now establishes an opposition between proximity (“bängen Wortverworrenheit”) and distance (“über den übervollen / glänzenden Gärten sind die Himmel *weit*” [emphasis added JD]), and between the horizontality of the earth (the gardens) and the infinitely receding verticality of the heavens. And with that the poem states, in the line that forms the exact center of the poem (line 16 of 31): the sun should have come once more. The reader is now trapped by a series of oppositions that emerge around his reading, which instead of providing a way out, has been broken apart under his reading gaze, leaving him without language (the autonomous words, the ellipsis) and in the dark: the sun would need to come again, he would need more light and time for reading, if it will be of any help to him.

This line is the pivoting point for the reversal of the poem, which now turns outwards from the inner space of reading. Although the reader himself has not yet looked up (“so weit *man* sieht” and not “so weit ich sehe”), we see the summer night: “Zu wenig Gruppen stellt sich das Verstreute, / dunkel auf langen Wegen gehn die Leute, / und seltsam weit, als ob es mehr bedeute, / hört man das wenige das noch geschieht.” In contrast to the book, which is characterized both by claustrophobic proximity (“bängen Wortverworrenheit”) and chaotic scattering, the language that describes the distance and scattering of the landscape is curiously (*seltsam*) ordered, precisely in its dispersion: there is no enjambment, and the rhymes (*Verstreute, Leute, bedeute* framed within *sieht* and *geschieht*) suggest an ordered tableau, not an obscure chaos. When the reader finally raises his eyes from the book, nothing will be strange, and everything will be grand (*groß*): it is no longer a question of inside versus the outside, but rather of all or nothing, that is, of a totality. Indeed, the next couplet explicitly erases the border between inside and outside: “Dort draußen ist, was ich hier drinnen lebe, / und hier und dort ist alles grenzenlos.” Chiasmus appears as a visual

crossing of words (dort / hier / hier / dort), transcending the opposition in a borderless totality, into which, in the next three lines, the poet weaves himself through his ability to make his glances correspond to things. The image of weaving restores the textual metaphor that was unraveled by reading, only now the “real” text is the fabric that binds the reader to the landscape. At last a proper “reading” as gathering can take place, namely an accumulation that is not congestion, but rather growth: “da wächst die Erde über sich hinaus.” But in contrast to the first image of monstrous growth (the words usurping the wholeness of the text), this image harmoniously resolves that final aspects of the poem’s oppositional structure: the earthly/horizontal and the heavenly/vertical. “Den ganzen Himmel *scheint* sie [die Erde] zu umfassen: / der erste Stern ist *wie* das letzte Haus [emphasis added JD].” The overgrowing earth seems to embrace the sky, and the celestial and domestic are fused into a single light at the horizon: the first star is *like* the last house.

The chiasmic reversal exchanges the bad totality of reading for the good totality of the landscape by inverting the oppositional structure of the poem: in the end, the outside is more of a shelter than the inside, the view of the distant horizon is closer than the pages of a book, the darkness of the night sky offers more illumination than an afternoon of sunlit reading. What is curious about this inversion, however, is that terms of the inversion are not transcended by the inversion itself: it is still a poem about reading and textuality, and the true inversion happens in the exchange of the literal for the metaphorical. As the experience of reading a text becomes too literal, as the words become almost tangible objects that spill out of the literally unraveling text, the poem has to transform the literal into the metaphorical to keep the threat of delirium at bay. What is literally undone in the first half of the poem is restored in the second, but metaphorically: the first half suggests that reading and textuality *as such* are a potential trauma, but the second half shows that reading and textuality as

metaphors, as principles of comparison, are indispensable for the sanity of the reader, for the stability of his place between heaven and earth, order and chaos, light and darkness, etc. This is what makes the “wie” of the last lines so significant: it shows that the objects of the comparison function like words: “Stern” is a image that functions like the word “Haus,” “Stern” *means* “Haus,” and the poem depicts the exchange of one sense of reading for another so that “Stern” can be read to mean “Haus.” Words become visual images (*Mienen*), and visual images function exactly like words—we note in passing de Man’s claim that the “entities, objects and subjects” of Rilke’s poems “themselves behave like words” (de Man 38)—and the tautology of this reversal is disguised by the beauty of the metaphorical language, its languid syntax, rhythm and rhyme. That final “wie” is the only sign of the remainder of the delirium, the residue left by the moment of delirium as one mode of metaphorical/literal imagery is substituted for another that is only *seemingly* different. And that seemingness is the poem’s truth: the fusion (of heaven and earth, outside and inside, world and self) that it depicts is never complete, it always bears the traces of its undoing, it always whispers that its totality is either metaphorical or nothing.

Here it is worth remarking that this poem belongs to the work of the “early” Rilke, to use a periodization employed by Beda Allemann.<sup>67</sup> In Allemann’s terms, the poetry of the “late” Rilke (e.g., the *Duineser Elegien* and the *Sonnette an Orpheus*) realizes another mode of metaphor, namely the *figure*, a metaphor that does not merely reverse spatial and temporal structures, but transcends them. He writes:

Metapher bedeutet nicht nur “Übertragung” im inhaltlichen Sinn, gar auf den ausdrücklichen wie-Vergleich eingeschränkt. Erst wenn man den Begriff der Metapher von der ungerechtfertigten Einschränkung auf Inhaltliches befreit und in der “Übertragung” den Gang des Gedichtes als solchen erkennt, kommt man zu einer Konzeption der Metapher, die dem Gedicht noch wirklich gewachsen ist. [. . .] Dieser

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<sup>67</sup>Allemann, Beda. *Zeit und Figur beim späten Rilke: ein Beitrag zur Poetik des modernen Gedichtes*. Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1961.

Gang ist der Gang der Verszeile und der Strophen in all seinen Aspekten, in die wir das Gedicht gewöhnlich auseinanderlegen, nach Inhalt, Form, Gehalt, Gestalt oder Rhythmus. Dieser Gang vollzieht sich als Figur, unter der Voraussetzung, daß wir jetzt Figur nicht mehr bloß inhaltlich als poetisches “Bild” verstehen, sondern wesentlicher als die “vom Dichter gewollte Figur,” die Bewegungskurve des Gedichtes in ihrer Einmaligkeit, von der die Sequenz der Inhalte und Bilder nur ein besonderer Aspekt ist. (239-40)

Rather than viewing the metaphor as one of many means of conveying poetic meaning, Allemann argues that the metaphor as figure transforms the entire essence of the poem into metaphor itself.

To make an analogy to landscape painting: the “wie-Vergleich” is like the dark cypress tree in Van Gogh’s “The Starry Night.”<sup>68</sup> We see an extraordinarily luminous sky, in which a crescent moon and stars, deeply embedded in a swirl of thick, dense brushstrokes, radiate soft, yellow light: the sky and the town below seem part of a single, continuous, fluid surface, composed of the same luminous blue, and painted in the same short, dense brushstrokes (almost giving the impression of a woodcut), done either in a horizontal flow or a concentric swirling pattern. Except there is a huge cypress at the left foreground of the painting that rises up in long, vertical brushstrokes, dark green, brown and black. To say “foreground” is already an exaggeration since the painting’s flattening of perspective suggests only a single, distant surface of sky, town and hillside: the tree is somehow in front of or in the way of the painting, not exactly a part of it. We cannot see its trunk, so it seems to grow up not so much out of the represented earth, as out of the frame or edge of the representation itself. The color, length and direction of the brushstrokes contradict the motion and color that have been painted into the rest of the image. Our sense of a benevolent night sky, of a luminosity that cannot be extinguished even in the night,

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<sup>68</sup> Vincent van Gogh painted “The Starry Night” during his stay at the San Rémy mental hospital. It represents a view from the barred window of his “studio” room. See Norbert Wolf’s short introduction to the painting in *Landschaftsmalerei*: Taschen, 2008, p. 72.

and of a cosmic swirling pattern joining in an infinite spiral at the center of the canvas: these interpretations are all called into question by the massive, unfurling growth of the tree that disrupts the symmetry and serenity of the image. As a symbol, the tree may represent Van Gogh's "madness" or just the bars of his hospital window that obstructed his view of the sky. In any case, we are forced both to overlook this monstrous image as some kind of stain or intrusion into an otherwise closed and beautiful representation, and to see this image as the very cost of the representation itself. Beautiful light, serenity, cosmic harmony all seem to depend on this dark, disfiguring, indecipherable blot that is at once inside and outside the scene of the landscape. Rilke's "wie" in the last line of the poem has a similar function. It is something to be disavowed: one reads it and understands its comparing function, and yet at the same time one does not read it, but rather indulges in the poetic power of the language that would join two things into one.<sup>69</sup> It is a transparent connector that both softens or eases the comparison of the star to the house and draws attention to its futility: one will always be *like* the other, in a relation engendered by a figurative language that is simultaneously self-effacing and self-referential. That is the significance of the "wie": a trace or scar left by figurative language in the moment when it asserts its power. Like Van Gogh's cypress, it both mars and completes the image.<sup>70</sup> And like the cypress, it is also a mark of a madness or delirium that the artist has tried to turn back around into art.

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<sup>69</sup> On Rilke's use of simile, Patrick Greany writes, "[. . .] the simile assigns characteristics and at the same time, emphasizes the estrangement from them with its "like" that separates vehicle and tenor. The simile creates more distance between vehicle and tenor even as it asserts their similarity." (102) in his *Untimely Beggars: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin*. U. of Minnesota Press, 2008. Here he relies on a Hegelian schema of metaphor and simile in which metaphor is "to be taken as *implicitly* already a simile, because it expresses the meaning, clear in itself, in a similar and comparable phenomenon of concrete reality. But in comparison as such both the sense proper and the image are specifically separated from one another, while this cleavage, though present implicitly, is not yet *posited* in metaphor." G. W. F. Hegel. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*. Trans. T. M. Knox. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1975, (I: 403 also cited in Greany).

<sup>70</sup> This paradox of disfigured totality recurs often in Rilke's poetry, especially his famous poem "Archaischer Torso Apollos," from *Neue Gedichte* (1907), 1: 557.

## Part II: Delirium as Nursery Rhyme: Benn's "Staatsbibliothek" (1925)

At this point we have read a particular scene or figuration of delirium. It unfolds in time, approaching and receding from a linguistic and subjective limit. The temporal unfolding of the poem is structured by a complex metaphoric (near/far, dark/light, inside/outside) which, even if it is profoundly reversed in the course of the poem, never loses its structuring function. Thus the literal delirium of the poem is transformed merely into a metaphor of delirium. The literal unraveling of words on the page becomes the metaphorical reading of the ordered outside world which bears more legibility than the pages of any book. The "wie" of the final stanza both conceals and reveals that metaphor is the necessary ground of any reading. A word as such, a sentence as such, a thing as such, reality as such are all illegible and unintelligible, but as a metaphor, as something else, they become meaningful and understandable. As Hegel would have it:

The meaning clearly confronting our minds is illustrated in the shape of some cognate external expression, yet so that thereby no problems arise which have first to be deciphered; what does arise is a figurative expression through which the envisaged meaning shines in perfect clarity and at once makes plain what it is. (I: 403)

Rilke's poem not only presupposes such a definition of figurative language, it thematizes it and performs it. Yet, if only negatively, indirectly, the poem presents a kind of fundamental chaos of things as they are: autonomous words rolling across the page, inscrutable to the reading eye and indecipherable to the understanding. Metaphor, for Rilke, must also be understood as a filter or screen protecting language—and its speakers, writers and readers—from its fundamental ungroundedness and otherness regarding things as they are. To anticipate my argument in Chapter 3, Rilke's theory of metaphor and his foregrounding of that theory in specific poems risk the exposure of their ungroundedness: the more closely

Rilke formulates and performs the structuring, sheltering function of metaphor, the more he risks collapsing the entire structure around him and exposing himself to the chaos of things, life, reality *as such*, an experience of delirium suffered at the limit of what poetic language makes possible. It is the story of this exposure, I argue, that Rilke tells in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. But before that, the poem “Der Lesende,” like the *Worpswede* monograph, both proclaims the harmonious totalizing power of poetic language and invokes, at least implicitly, its undermining in the same moment.

If there is a delirium in Rilke’s poem, I argue that it is to be found precisely in the ambiguity of its poetic language, in the precise moment when the mechanism of chiasmus sets to work, but before it completely converts the chaos into order. The delirium would thus reside in what the poem does *not* say, its most hermetic passages (line 13-6) when the verse trails off in ellipses and the poet gains an obscure insight: “Da weiß ich es: über den übervollen / glänzenden Gärten sind die Himmel weit; / die Sonne hat noch einmal kommen sollen.-” The certainty of the poet’s knowledge, combined with the obscurity and suggestiveness of its content, remains, from the perspective of the metaphorical understanding which the poem itself performs, out of the furrows. Even though the poet quickly finds his way back to the structuring, sheltering furrows of metaphorical understanding, Rilke’s poem suggests that he must first stray from them in order to assert them again. Delirium would thus not be a deviation from poetic language, but rather its intensification. It belongs to a poetic model that views the foregrounding, undermining and (temporary, or disavowed) re-concealing of the ungroundedness of poetic language as a necessary part of the poetic process.

It is here that I oppose Benn’s poem “Staatsbibliothek” (1925) because Benn, unlike Rilke, does not poeticize delirium in such a quasi-dialectical fashion. Benn’s

delirium does not unfold in time, does not move toward and circle back away from that limit of language and subjectivity where one finally glimpses what lies beyond the furrow, so to speak. Rather than use metaphor to oscillate in and out of delirium, Benn posits words and syntax themselves as the primal elements of a delirious poetics.<sup>71</sup>

Benn's poem "Staatsbibliothek" (1925) depicts the moment when reading ceases to be a process of cognition or understanding, and the structures of metaphor and meaning give way to the primal positing (*primäre Setzung*) of words as the task of the poet.<sup>72</sup> Benn comments on this primal positing in his famous 1951 address, "Probleme der Lyrik," contrasting his poetics perhaps harshly, but also respectfully, with the poetics of Rilke. As he enumerates a series of "symptoms" by which a contemporary poem can be identified as not fully "modern," he writes:

Das *zweite Symptom* ist das WIE. Bitte beachten Sie, wie oft in einem Gedicht "wie" vorkommt. Wie, oder wie wenn, oder es ist, als ob, das sind Hilfskonstruktionen, meistens Leerlauf. [. . .] Dies Wie ist immer ein Bruch in der Vision, es holt heran, es vergleicht, es ist keine primäre Setzung. Aber auch hier muß ich einfügen, es gibt großartige Gedichte mit WIE. Rilke war ein großer WIE-Dichter. In einem seiner schönsten Gedichte "Archaischer Torso Apollos" steht in vier Strophen dreimal WIE, und zwar sogar recht banale "Wies": wie ein Kandelaber, wie Raubtierfelle, wie ein Stern – und in seinem Gedicht "Blaue Hortensie" finden wir in vier Strophen viermal WIE: Darunter: wie in einer Kinderschürze – wie in alten blauen Briefpapieren – nun gut, Rilke konnte das, aber als Grundsatz können Sie sich daran halten, daß WIE immer ein Einbruch des Erzählerischen, Feuilletonistischen in die Lyrik ist, ein Nachlassen der sprachlichen Spannung, eine Schwäche der schöpferischen Transformation. (VI: 18)

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<sup>71</sup> If one reflects on the relation between meaning and syntax even in "normal" or non-delirious texts, one sees that meaning is always to a certain extent delirious: the meaning of a sentence, for example, is not reducible to any of its parts, yet all of its parts taken together constitute meaning. Adding or subtracting one word from a sentence can entirely alter the meaning; likewise, the meaning of a sentence can rule out (or generate) multiple meanings in a given word. Meaning is both exterior to the structure of a sentence, yet also everywhere present in the sentence as the force which both determines it and toward which it is directed. Delirium is thus not the opposite of meaning, but rather its intensification, the expression of a force that is inherent to language, but at the same time always in excess of it.

<sup>72</sup> The concept of "primal positing" is further discussed, especially through the example of another of Benn's meta-poetic texts, "Satzbau" (1950, I: 238) in Chapter 4.



For Benn, the WIE is always a break in the primal positing of poetry, an easing or yielding of the creative tension of the language, a shift to the discursive, conversational or everyday tone: the moment when a poem becomes a poem *about* something instead of a poem in and of itself. Presumably, Benn prefers to write WIE in capital letters to emphasize its interruptive function, since WIE (like LIKE in English) is a word that is usually overlooked, its “as if” quality too often glossed over. Rilke is a great “WIE-Dichter,” whose similes are still capable of some of the most startling and powerful transformations in all of poetry, but as a WIE-Dichter, he cannot be as modern (as cold, as hard, as absolute, as expressive) as Benn himself.

To continue this harsh, but respectful comparison, let us look at Benn’s poem about reading, which I approach as a counterpoint to Rilke’s “Der Lesende:”

Staatsbibliothek<sup>73</sup>

Staatsbibliothek, Kaschemme,  
Resultatverlies,  
Satzbordell, Maremmen,  
*Fieberparadies:*  
wenn die Katamomben  
glühn im Wortvibrier,  
und die Hekatomben  
sind *ein* weißer Stier –

wenn Vergang der Zeiten,  
wenn die Stunden stockt,  
weil im Satz der Seiten  
*eine* Silbe lockt,  
die den Zweckgewalten,  
reinem Lustgewinn  
rauscht in Sturzgestalten  
löwenhaft den Sinn – :

wenn das Säkulare,  
tausendstimmig Blut  
auferlebt im Aare  
neuer Himmel ruht:

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<sup>73</sup> Benn, I: 85.

Opfer, Beil und Wunde,  
Hades, Mutterhort  
für der Schöpfungstunde  
traumbeladenes Wort.

In contrast to Rilke's "Der Lesende," there is no "ich," no scene and no indication of time or its unfolding. The only indication of the passage of time ("die Stunde stockt") is embedded within an endless, inverted "if, then" pattern that seems to structure the whole poem, but does not seem to give us a definite temporal cue (or any other kind of cue for that matter). In Rilke's poem, when time contracts and then expands, there is a kind of rhythm to it that lends the moment of stoppage the structural value of a caesura: a planned pause, heavy with meaning, a halt that presupposes the continuance of time, rhythm, and the reading process. Benn's "die Stunde stockt" (the hour stalls, lags, sputters) is locked within a tortured conditional clause so that it cannot properly be said even to begin to stall. It is rather posited in a subjunctive, hypothetical realm unconnected to a definite space and time. The poem does not use the metaphorical structure of "like," nor do its words and images offer anything "like" a narrative or allegorical content for our understanding.

The first four lines of the poem consist of a sequence of nouns, no conjunctions or subordinations, separated (or joined) only by commas. If there is a pattern, it would be a two-word line followed by a one-word line, as if the one-word line were a kind of logical conclusion or synthesis. In the rhythm and rhyme of this pattern, there is an incantatory quality to the language, which suspends grammar and syntax and invokes single words in rapid succession. "Staatsbibliothek," both the title and first word, is the only indication of a scene or referent in the poem. Presumably, we are in the stacks of the national library Unter den Linden in Berlin.<sup>74</sup> "Kaschemme"

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<sup>74</sup> We know from a letter to Joachim Moras dated 24.08.53 of Benn's old habit of reading in the stacks of the national library Unter den Linden: "Einer der ernstesten Gründe meiner Depression ist, daß es in West-Berlin keine Bibliothek mehr gibt, die alte große liegt im Ost-Berlin und ist für uns nicht zugänglich. [ . . . ] Das wunderschöne Flackern von einem Buch zum andern, das in der alten

is derived from a “gypsy” (*zigeunerisch*) word for brothel (Duden, 2003), and gives the suggestion of a sexual charge to the stacks of books. “Resultatverließ” is an invented word that would mean something like “dungeon of results,” suggesting a place where the efforts of a research, experiment or measurement come to nothing, or where calculations are worthless. “Satzbordell,” another neologism, expands upon the idea of the brothel as a place for promiscuity in or with language. The sentence becomes the site for the coupling of words that is lewd, obscene, illicit, transactional, and from which there will be no “resultant:” promiscuity, but not procreation, fusion or growth. This develops the unsettling idea that the books themselves are in some kind of sexual intercourse with each other, or that the patronage of the national library amounts to soliciting prostitution. The atmosphere of these words is suffused with a vague, unerotic, but sexual charge that is related more to words than to human sexuality and human bodies. “Maremme” seems to stand for the Italian region of Maremma in southern Tuscany.<sup>75</sup> Finally the word “Fieberparadies” juxtaposes the heavenly, redemptive connotations of paradise with the very earthly, bodily condition of fever associated not with divine truth, but with delirious hallucination.

But what does that feverish paradise have to do with the landscape of central Italy, with brothels, and the books in the library? After this montage of words that concludes with “Fieberparadies,” we see a colon: we expect a kind of conclusion to the series of words as if they were the terms of a proposition, as if they would add up

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Staatsbibliothek Unter den Linden früher möglich war, ist nicht mehr zu erleben.” See the commentary on Benn’s “Staatsbibliothek” in his collected works, volume 1.

<sup>75</sup> Maremma is known for its coast, hills, swamps and marshes. It is mentioned in the *Divine Comedy* and was later praised for its beauty in the “Idillio maremmano” (1872) of Giosu  Carducci, a famous poet of 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy, who was raised in the region. In a passage from an 1829 book review by Mary Shelley, the pools of the Maremma exemplify the reflection of nature that constitutes the essence of poetry. In colloquial Italian, the phrase “Maremma maiala” is also a way of invoking the Virgin Mary without actually blaspheming, that is, of circumlocuting a linguistic taboo. My thanks to Paola Iovene for these references. The associations of “Maremma” could potentially go on forever, but this only supports the point I am trying to make about Benn’s use of words as the primal element of poetry. Maremma, or Maremm , is an image that exceeds its linguistic context, while at the same fitting neatly, without a remainder, into the formal construction of the poem.

to something. Instead the next line introduces the convoluted “if/then” structure of the poem, or rather the structure of a series of “ifs” and an elusive “then,” if there even is one. It is possible that the four lines that begin the poem are already its “logical” conclusion, the syntax of the conditional clauses having been reversed. “Wenn die Katakomben / glühn im Wortvibrier,” introduces another neologism, the glowing of *Wortvibrier* that creates the image of an audible or tangible vibration of words that manifests itself visually (glowing)—the words are vibrating and heating up in a spontaneous and sporadic movement that enlivens the dead space of the catacombs, of the library that is simultaneously a brothel, a Tuscan swamp and now a network of (Roman?) tombs. The images and associations proliferate, and no clear structure of oppositions arises. Meanwhile, the (inverted?) syntax of the “if/then” statement pushes forward blindly in the expectation of some kind of insight or conclusion. The next line introduces the *Hekatomben*, an ancient Greek word for the religious sacrifice of one hundred bulls,<sup>76</sup> but it is contracted or condensed to just one white bull: “Und die Hekatomben / sind *ein* weißer Stier –” The *Gedankenstrich* and breaking-off of the stanza function as a pause for drawing breath, or a pause for the reading eye, before the series of “if” statements begins again with renewed intensity.

There are enough ancient Greek and Latin references so far to justify a quick look at the poem’s scansion. It consists of alternating lines of three feet and two feet (trimeter and dimeter), each trimeter is composed of three trochees (long/short), while each dimeter of one trochaic and one cretic foot (long/short/long). (The first line is the only exception: a dactyl [long/short/short], followed by two trochees).<sup>77</sup> The specifics of the scansion do not matter so much for our purposes as its unswerving regularity: in a poem, in which the syntax is disjointed and the images accumulate in such a disarray

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Benn’s “Die Insel” (III: 67).

<sup>77</sup> For metrical terms, see Paul Fussell, Jr. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. New York: Random House, 1965.

of associations, the form of the poem remains utterly regular, its meter and rhyme (abab,cddc etc) flawless and harmonious. The formal euphony of the poem contradicts the cacophony of its meaning and syntax, and that contradiction is the condition of Benn's primal positing.<sup>78</sup>

The next three lines each begin with "w" (wenn, wenn, weil) and a quick succession of alliterations (*Stunde stockt; Satz, Seiten, Silbe*) enhances the hypnotic, incantatory quality of the rigid meter and rhyme. But in radical contrast to the temporal precision of the poem's form, the temporal meaning of the words reflects the opposite of precision (i.e., the transience of the ages, the sputtering of the hour). What the poem achieves at the level of formal mastery could not contradict its semantic or conceptual dimensions more sharply: "wenn Vergang der Zeiten, / wenn die Stunde stockt, / weil im Satz der Seiten / *eine* Silbe lockt." The images of temporal passage ("Vergang der Zeiten") or temporal sputtering ("die Stunde stockt") are themselves not temporalized, but only conditional clauses that are not actually inserted into a causal, temporal sequence. There is a curious intimation that the poem has not yet properly begun, but is still merely stating its poetic premises, yet at the same time it seems already to have demonstrated its proof in the first four lines.

The phrase "im Satz der Seiten" evokes the setting of pages for the printing press, reminding us that we are somehow still in the library. But the reading process (like the printing process) seems to be stalled or sputtering (just like time itself) because just *one* syllable catches, lures, sticks, and this *one* syllable charges or rushes meaning like a lion: "weil im Satz der Seiten, / *eine* Silbe lockt, die den

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<sup>78</sup> Helmut Lethen's comment on Benn's 1913 poem *Gesänge* could also serve for "Staatsbibliothek": "Auch Regressionsvorstellungen sind 'Vokabelmischungen.' Sobald Benns Rhythmusmaschine sie erfasst, das Raster des Metrums und die Echowirkungen der Reime die Sehnsucht in volksliedhafte Form bringen, nehmen sie eine abgründige Komik an" (50). Indeed the cryptic-comic effect of "Staatsbibliothek" resides in its "promiscuous" effacement between art and kitsch. Benn writes: "*Kunst ist auch Kitsch*, will ja auch wirken, verzaubern, hinreißen" (letter to the Hindemiths dated June 6, 1932, cited in Lethen, 100).

Zweckgewalten, reinem Lustgewinn rauscht in Sturzgestalten / löwenhaft den Sinn – :” The syllable, the smallest, most fundamental building block of a word’s phonetic composition, overwhelms its semantic meaning like a lion. The word “löwenhaft,” another animal reference, reminds one of I. A. Richards famous example of functioning of metaphor from *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936): Achilles, the lion. Richards shows how the metaphorical statement parses into two terms, the vehicle and the tenor. Here Achilles (the tenor) is called a lion (the vehicle) in a statement that attributes the fierceness, pride, strength or dominance of the lion to Achilles. For Benn, the meaning of that metaphor, the referential vehicle that makes it understandable (in this case, the presumed or attributed fierceness, pride, strength or dominance of the lion) is poetically insignificant; rather the word itself (say, “Achilles” or “leonine”) is already so charged with meaning, so rife with associations (what Benn often refers to as *Wallungswert*<sup>79</sup>) that the meaning-effect produced by metaphor in fact reduces the power of the word. In “Der Geburtstag,” one of the Rönne texts collected in 1916 under the title *Gehirne*, Benn writes, “[V]ielleicht sei schon die Metapher ein Fluchtversuch, eine Art Vision, und ein Mangel an Treue” (III: 51). And in *Epilog und Lyrisches Ich*, he suggests that the proper name proves that the power of a word is independent of its meaning: “Phäaken, Megalithen, lernäische Gebiete – allerdings Namen, allerdings zum Teil von mir sogar gebildet, aber wenn sie sich nahen, werden sie mehr“ (III: 132). The “more” that these words become is for Benn always an ambiguous amalgamation of *Wiedekehr* and *Untergang*: the power of the word (“schwer erklärbare Macht des Wortes, das löst und fügt” [III: 133]) cuts back to the primal positing of words unhindered by any conceptual ballast, a phantasm of some kind of originary creative gesture that, even if Benn seems to mock it elsewhere (e.g., in a poem like “Gesänge” [1913]) retains a seductive power and remains a

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<sup>79</sup> III: 132.

productive force through most, if not all, of his writing.<sup>80</sup>

In any case, here the word, even the single syllable, in its double-edged power, is called upon as a kind of resistance to the *Zweckgewalten* and *Lustgewinn* of meaning. That resistance takes shape in *Sturzgestalten*, plunge- or lapse-forms, in figures of a fall, another self-contradictory word: a fall, a plummet, a dive, a lurch—this is a notion that is ambiguously active and passive. The diving or falling object may have set itself in motion or may have been forced by some external agent. The dive could be an expenditure of its own force (he dove out the door, he threw himself into his work, the lion threw itself upon the zebra—all examples of *stürzen* from the Duden), or the exposure of the self to larger, external forces (like gravity). And yet that falling-throwing is contained within shapes, *Gestalten*, contours or figures of a movement that disrupts shapes and defies delineation. *Stürzen* is not the graceful, parabolic arc of simple falling, but rather implies a chaotic intensity that cannot be described with geometric regularity. Yet the word exists on the page, each of its parts, even each of its syllables (the explosive *Sturz* and the static *-stalt*) exceeding and undoing each other, but at the same time embodying in a single word the “meaning” of the whole poem: the maximum of irresolvable, uncontainable conceptual dissonance condensed into the minimum of verbo-visual-acoustic form. The dim, contradictory allusiveness of the conceptual, associative register of the poem is eerily matched by

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<sup>80</sup> Benn often suggests that the return of the word, its power to restore or evoke that primal fantasm, is also the *Untergang* or *Zertrümmerung* of bourgeois values, instrumental rationality, capitalist ideology, positivism and the Cartesian ego. It would seem that, for Benn, only the true and heroic artist is capable of such a destructive and radical exposure of the individual existence to the primal void. Implicit in his poetry and quite explicit in prose (especially the essays written during his enthusiasm for fascism in the late 1920s and early 30s) is an extreme form of Nietzschean aesthetic nihilism and romantic anticapitalism. For a critique of the social and political implications of Benn’s aestheticism, see Peter Hohendahl’s “The Loss of Reality: Gottfried Benn’s Early Prose” in *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism*. Ed. Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989. 81-94. For a Marxist critique of Benn’s aestheticism, see Lukács’ 1934 essay “Größe und Verfall des Expressionismus” reprinted in *Probleme des Realismus*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1955. Lukács argues that Benn’s aesthetic strategy and pseudopolitical position is in fact the epitome of bourgeois values, the bourgeois flight from reality, and a worldview whose real, objective radicality decreases in proportion to its rhetorically hyperbolic radicalization.

the cold, elegant formal precision of its composition. This tension recalls another meaning of *stürzen*: to plough a field, from which is derived the ambiguous word *Sturzacker* (as in English, a fallow field): this refers both to a freshly ploughed field ready for sowing and to a field whose soil has been exhausted after multiple harvests and so is ploughed over and left to rest for one or more growing seasons. A *Sturzacker* represents both the maximum potential for growth and what remains when growth is no longer possible. Benn seems to evoke both aspects of this image: his furrows of poetic form are rife with potential and are at the same time barren.

The last stanza gives another obscure image of condensation and the final conditional statement of the poem: “Wenn das Säkulare / tausendstimmig Blut / auferlebt im Aare / neuer Himmel ruht” the thousand-voiced blood of an age is resurrected as an eagle in new skies, and there follows another colon by which we expect the conclusion to the “if” clauses, a final insight into what it all means. Only we read another barrage of words which culminates in the “the hour of creation’s dream-charged word.” “Opfer, Beil und Wunde / Hades, Mutterhort / für der Schöpfungsstunde / traumbeladenes Wort.” In a word, the poem restates the enigmatic truth expressed in all of its words.

The last stanza remains obscure also for Helmut Lethen, who, in his citation and brief discussion of “Staatsbibliothek,” simply omits it. But what interests Lethen is the associative quality of Benn’s words, how they are both freed from their descriptive function (their referentiality), yet at the same time reverberate through the “Archiv des Wissens” of contemporary science, ethnology and psychiatry, i. e., the national library (94-5). Benn’s words, then, are not pure, absolute or autonomous; rather they presuppose a particular semantic and even scientific function that is loosened just so, and, given the trance-like effect of the rhyme and meter of the poem, generate free associations that “folgen den Bahnen der Querverweise in



Enzyklopädien” (95). The chain of free associations depends upon a pre-existing system of concepts and terminology only to dissolve and combine it “promiscuously” with any and every register of language that comes to mind (and scans and rhymes appropriately). To take Lethen’s commentary a step further, it is only *then* that the words *as* words approach the “reader” of the text. Benn himself may be describing this poem in his “Epilog und lyrisches Ich”:

Bei der Lektüre eines, nein, zahlloser Bücher durcheinander,  
Verwirrungen von Ären, Pêlemêle von Stoffen und Aspekten,  
Eröffnung weiter typologischer Schichten: entrückter strömender  
Beginn. [. . .] Nun nähern sich vielleicht schon Worte, Worte  
durcheinander, dem Klaren noch nicht bemerkbar, aber die  
Flimmerhaare tasten es heran. (III: 132)

Reading itself enables the poet’s creative relation to the word. The physical act of reading countless books in and out of the other (*durcheinander*) jumbles the discourses, temporalities and subject-matter of so many different eras, worldviews and technical terms that the chaos of books dissolves into chaos of words and phrases (*Worte, worte durcheinander*). The reader is exposed to a pre- or pan-historical revelation (*Eröffnung*, also a medical term for “lancing”) where words link all times and discourses through their proximity to each other and to the reader’s *Flimmerhaare*. We are dealing again with the tactile word, without meaning or context, only a pure verbal form creating a semantic and conceptual fog that flattens all discursive registers and historical periodizations to one timeless, contourless surface of verbal vibration (*Wortvibrier*). Reading, then, is not a metaphor of the process of understanding a poem, nor is it that process itself: reading is the physical heaping-together of words upon the non-cerebral brain that produces a delirium in the reader (indistinguishable now from the poet), which, precisely because all words are potentially equivalent in delirium, the reader-poet approaches and forms into surgically precise verses that lose nothing of their verbal frenzy. What Holger Hof

says of Benn's writing techniques in the composition of his essays (his "Montagekunst" of gathering and shaping verbal material from other authors) could also hold true for a poem like "Staatsbibliothek:"

*Schreibtechnik und Lesewirkung* hängen insofern zusammen, als *das Lesen* bereits *ein Schreiben* ist und somit ein zentraler, produktiver Prozeß. [. . .] Produktives Lesen meint, sich den unmittelbaren Reizes eines Textes, seien sie optischer, klanglicher, halluzinativ-assoziativer oder auch inhaltlicher Art, auszusetzen. (247)<sup>81</sup>

It is precisely the oscillation between reading and writing that brings the poet/reader into delirious contact with language, that exposes the immediate sensation of a text in its optical, acoustic, hallucinatory and constative dimensions. And as Hof also points out, that oscillation emerges through "einerseits die Bewegung beim Blättern der Seiten, andererseits die intensive Beschäftigung mit den Sätzen, den Worten bis in die Silben hinein" (244). Both in reading a chaos of books one after the other, and yet at the same time, dissecting a single word into its constituent syllables, Benn transforms the reading of delirium into its writing.<sup>82</sup>

Carl Einstein's hyperbolic, yet precise assessment of Benn's poetry (written, one is almost certain, with such a poem as "Staatsbibliothek" in mind) is perhaps more accurate than Lethen seems to admit:

Hier ist ein Sprachmittel von erheblicher Bedeutung gewiesen, das syntaktisch und im Tempo Definitives und Halten gewährt, inhaltlich aber ganz im Potentiellen bleibt; oder durch Häufung dieser Worte, ihre Kontraste und Verschiedenheit eilen die Gesichte vorbei. Diese Substantive wirken wie Elemente; eine komplizierte Seele reagiert in einfachen Mitteln ab und verfängt sie nicht in beschreibender Stufung: der Leser wirft in diese Brunnen seine eigene Spiegelung und Färbung. Dank diesem Aneinanderreihen der halluzinativen Substantive meidet

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<sup>81</sup> Hof, *Montagekunst und Sprachmagie: Zur Zitiertechnik in der essayistischen Prosa Gottfried Benns*. Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 1997. See also my discussion of "aussetzen" in Chapter 3.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Wegmann also discusses "das Umschlagen von Rezeption in Produktion" in Benn's "Staatsbibliothek" in his argument for the logic of parasitism and contamination in Benn's aesthetics. See "Die Moderne tiefer legen: Gottfried Benns Ästhetik der parasitären Störung" in *Gottfried Benns Modernität*. Ed. Friederike Reents. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007, 55-74. Wolfgang Emmerich comments on the hallucinatory quality of words in "Staatsbibliothek" in the context of Benn's transition from his "Rauschgedichte" of the 1910s and 1920s to the "statische Gedichte" of his later work. See his essay "Benns bacchische Epiphanien und ihr Dementi" in the same collection, pp. 89-106.

man die kausale Bindung; die Analogien stehen nackt, direkt gegeneinander, dazwischen strömt die lebendige Substanz des Ich als tätige und empfindende Einheit. Man meidet das Rationale und fragwürdig Teleologische der kausalen Folge, sammelt in fast gleichzeitige Vision die Elemente und nennt in diesen Hauptworten die verschiedenen Aspekte eines lyrischen Zustandes.<sup>83</sup>

The near-simultaneous vision in which the reader gathers (*sammelt*) the elements of the poem is precisely the reading-as-gathering in the haptic space of a delirious text. The near-simultaneity of Benn's words suggests their eruption out of syntax and out of temporal unfolding, yet the reading eye nevertheless moves from word to word, reading the elements that are both heaped together chaotically and arranged according to a tempo and a definite posture. Einstein describes the combination of verbal control and sematic explosion, of rational agency and irrational, vital substance that constitutes the delirious composition—and, implicitly, the delirious reading—of Benn's poetry.

There are two passages from texts by Friedrich Nietzsche that function as pervasive and specific (if not directly acknowledged) intertexts to the poetic and aesthetic discourse that I outline in this chapter and in the Introduction. I cite them here as a transition to the next chapter on Worringer because they introduce two crucial aspects or motifs of this period that are especially significant for Worringer's thought, which participates in the aesthetic discourse of Expressionism, yet also has roots in the overlapping discourse of *Lebensphilosophie*. Nietzsche's work already embodies the dual discourse of aestheticism and vitalism, as we seen in this first passage from *Der Fall Wagner* (1888), which, in its depiction of a montage of words leaping out sentences, seems to have anticipated both Rilke's "Der Lesende" and Benn's "Staatsbibliothek:"

Womit kennzeichnet sich jede *literarische décadence*? Damit, dass das Leben nicht mehr im Ganzen wohnt. Das Wort wird souverän und

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<sup>83</sup> Cited as reprinted in Peter Hohendahl's *Benn: Wirkung wider Willen: Dokumente der Wirkungsgeschichte Benns*. Frankfurt am Main: Athäneum, 1971, p. 124.

springt aus dem Satz hinaus, der Satz greift über und verdunkelt den Sinn der Seite, die Seite gewinnt Leben auf Unkosten des Ganzen – das Ganze ist kein Ganzes mehr. Aber das ist das Gleichnis für jeden Stil der *décadence*: jedes Mal Anarchie der Atome, Disgregation des Willens, “Freiheit des Individuums,” moralisch geredet – zu einer politischen Theorie erweitert, “*gleiche* Rechte für alle.” Das Leben, die *gleiche* Lebendigkeit, die Vibration und Exuberanz des Lebens in die kleinsten Gebilde zurückgedrängt, der Rest *arm* an Leben. Überall Lähmung, Mühsal, Erstarrung *oder* Feindschaft und Chaos: beides immer mehr in die Augen springend, in je höhere Formen der Organisation man aufsteigt. Das Ganze lebt überhaupt nicht mehr; es ist zusammengesetzt, berechnet, künstlich, ein Artefact. – <sup>84</sup> (917)

[What is the sign of every *literary decadence*? That life no longer dwells in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page gains life at the expense of the whole—the whole is no longer a whole. But this is the simile of every style of *decadence*: every time, the anarchy of atoms, disgregation of the will, “freedom of the individual,” to use moral terms—expanded into a political theory, “*equal* rights for all.” Life, *equal* vitality, the vibration and exuberance of life pushed back into the smallest forms; the rest, *poor* in life. Everywhere paralysis, arduousness, torpidity *or* hostility and chaos: both more and more obvious the higher one ascends in forms of organization. The whole no longer lives at all: it is composite, calculated, artificial, and artifact.— (626)] <sup>85</sup>

What for Nietzsche is a form of decadence and an atrophy of aesthetic life, is turned around by the Expressionists into a positive, affirmative creative principle.<sup>86</sup> The autonomy of the part (the word) comes at the cost of the integrity of the whole. When Nietzsche adds the dimension of *life* to the problem of words in their relation to syntax, to the monstrous growth of individual parts at the expense of the whole, to the

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<sup>84</sup> Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Band 6. Ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Munich, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag de Gruyter, 1988. This is a passage that Georg Lukács cites repeatedly in his polemics against Expressionism and modernism in general, though it should be mentioned that Lukács omits the phrases about morality, equal rights, and democracy. See *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 44n7.

<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner in Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Ed. and Trans. Walter Kaufmann. Intro. Peter Gay. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.

<sup>86</sup> See for a general thematic account of the appropriation of vitalism by the Expressionists (from which both Benn and Rilke are however for the most part missing), see Gunter Martens'. *Vitalismus und Expressionismus: Ein Beitrag zur Genese und Deutung expressionistischer Stilstrukturen und Motive*. Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1971.

proliferation of hybrid forms, composite structures, arte-facts of de-composing organization, we begin to catch a glimpse of what Wilhelm Worringer may be undertaking in his uncanny synthesis of abstraction and empathy in the name of *expression*. This becomes clearer in the following passage from Nietzsche's early essay "Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne" (1873), which introduces an architectural metaphoric to the problem of life:

Wie die Römer und Etrusker sich den Himmel durch starre mathematische Linien zerschnitten und in einen solchermaassen abgegrenzten Raum als in ein templum einen Gott bannten, so hat jedes Volk über sich einen solchen mathematisch zertheilten Begriffshimmel und versteht nun unter der Forderung der Wahrheit, dass jeder Begriffsgoot nur in *seiner* Sphäre gesuchte werde. Man darf hier den Menschen wohl bewundern als ein gewaltiges Baugenie, dem auf beweglichen Fundamenten und gleichsam fliessendem Wasser das Aufthürmen eines unendlich complicirten Begriffsdomes gelingt; freilich, um auf solchen Fundamenten Halt zu finden, muss es ein Bau, wie aus Spinnefäden sein, so zart, um von der Welle mit fortgetragen, so fest, um nicht von dem Winde auseinander geblasen zu werden. Als Baugenie erhebt sich solcher Maassen der Mensch weit über die Biene: diese baut aus Wachs, das sie aus der Natur zusammenholt, er aus dem weit zarteren Stoffe der Begriffe, die er erst aus sich fabriciren muss. (882)<sup>87</sup>

[As the Romans and Etruscans carved up the sky into rigid mathematical sectors and assigned a god to each delimited space as in a temple, so every nation has such a mathematically divided conceptual sky above it and understands by the demand for truth that each conceptual god must be sought only in *his* own sphere. In this respect man can probably be admired as a mighty architectural genius who succeeds in building an infinitely complicated conceptual cathedral on foundations that move like flowing water; of course, in order to anchor itself to such a foundation, the building must be light as gossamer — delicate enough to be carried along by the wave, yet strong enough not to be blown apart by the wind. As an architectural genius, man excels the bee; for it builds out of wax which it collects from nature, while man builds out of the much more delicate material of the concepts, which he must fabricate out of his own self. (251)]<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup> KSA I.

<sup>88</sup> "On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense" in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*. Ed. Trans. and Intro. Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair and David J. Parent. Oxford University Press, 1989.

The idea of a conceptual cathedral, built out of human thought and human bodies, floating on a metaphorical foundation and towering into imaginary space, prepares the way for Worringer's discussion of Gothic cathedrals and the conceptual and stylistic impasses of expression and non-organic life. There begins our reading of delirium in a distinct, but not mutually exclusive discursive context (the late 19<sup>th</sup> / early 20<sup>th</sup> century school of thought called *Lebensphilosophie*, which tries to build rational, conceptual "cathedrals" on an irrational foundation of mystical vitalism) and in terms of a specific textual problematic: ekphrasis, the confrontation between the verbal and visual in a literary text.

## CHAPTER 2

### DELIRIUM OF EXPRESSION IN THE ART HISTORY OF WILHELM WORRINGER

Auch dieses Wort ist in seiner Verwendung und Bedeutung höchst elastisch. “Denn eben wo Begriffe fehlen, da stellt ein Wort zur rechten Zeit sich ein.”<sup>89</sup>

[This word is also highly elastic in its use and meaning. “For just where concepts are lacking, a word always turns up at the right moment.”]

—Wilhelm Worringer (and J. W. v. Goethe)

To say that Wilhelm Worringer’s two most famous books, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* (1908) and *Formprobleme der Gotik* (1911) exemplify a “delirious poetics” would not be entirely accurate. These are not poetic texts, nor, as prose texts (indeed, *academic* prose texts: the first a dissertation, the second a *Habilitationsschrift*) are they even remotely as experimental as Rilke’s *Aufzeichnungen* and Benn’s *Gehirne*. Nevertheless, I argue that Worringer makes an analogous intervention in his discursive field (not lyric poetry, not experimental prose, but art history) at the level of the individual word. His writing complicates the univocality of the relation between a word and a concept: instead of a word referring consistently to a precisely defined concept (which would then be fit into a logical sequence of other concepts to produce a rational, intelligible argument), Worringer’s art history tacitly exploits the rich, irrational metaphorical basis of concepts that we just saw Nietzsche describe in his image of the cathedral and that the Expressionists use as a poetic principle.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, his theory of art (what he calls in his own words

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<sup>89</sup> Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* (1908), p. 69; Goethe, *Faust* I, 1995-6.

<sup>90</sup> Besides this stylistic affinity to Expressionism, Worringer was also one of the theoretical spokespeople of the artistic movement in Germany. In a 1911 essay in Walden’s journal *Der Sturm*, Worringer was one of the first German critics or artists to use the word “expressionism” in print.

“Kunsttheorie” as distinct from “Ästhetik”) is an explicit departure from the 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic of beauty and naturalism, and his whole project consists in trying to find the right words (and concepts) for an aesthetic experience that, within the discourse of classical art history, ceaselessly refuses or confuses categorization.<sup>91</sup> Within the discipline of art history, then, I suggest Worringer’s works represent an analogous transitional moment to the texts of Benn and Rilke that I analyze in Chapters 3 and 4: it is a writing that craves to push itself out of the furrows of traditional aesthetic categories in order to gain access to another form of experience and expression, but in doing so suffers from the chaos of that exteriority and the contradictory need to order the chaos. Worringer’s writing is thus both a liberation of thought from traditional art-historical categories and the paralysis of that thought in the chaos of conceptual impasses that lies outside the furrows.

In this chapter I trace how Worringer’s concepts lose their distinctness and become mixed metaphors, tropes that turn around themselves, pointing nowhere or pointing vertiginously. The concepts that compose Worringer’s argument (historical and hermeneutic concepts like abstraction, empathy and expression) become instead

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Through the teens and twenties, he wrote reviews and art criticism on Expressionist exhibitions, in addition to his scholarly work on ancient and medieval art (which itself was seen, by Lukács and others, as the tacit advocacy of Expressionism under the guise of “Gothic expression.”) For the genesis of the word “expressionism” across German art media between 1910 and 1914, see the Otto Best’s preface to *Theorie des Expressionismus* (cited in Introduction); pp. 18-21 in Wolf-Dieter Dube’s *Expressionism*. Trans. Mary Whittal. New York, Oxford University Press, 1972; and pp. 75-7 in John Willett’s *Expressionism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970). Willett also makes the useful distinction between expressionism (lower case) as a transhistorical, and not necessarily Germanic stylistic phenomenon and Expressionism (with a capital “E”) as the uniquely German art movement that flourished in the so-called Expressionist decade, 1910-1920.

<sup>91</sup> The relevant passages are the section “Kunsttheorie und Aesthetik” in *Formproblem der Gotik*, pp. 5-10, especially: “Und es wäre nur ein Zwangsgebot unserer Wortarmut, hinter der sich in diesem Falle allerdings auch eine sehr empfindliche Erkenntnisarmut verbirgt, wenn wir von einer Schönheit der Gotik sprechen wollten. Diese angebliche Schönheit der Gotik ist ein modernes Missverständnis. Ihre wirkliche Grösse hat mit der uns geläufigen Kunstvorstellung, die notwendigerweise in dem Begriff ‘schön’ gipfeln muss, so wenig zu tun, dass eine Uebnahme dieses Wortes für gotische Werte nur Verwirrung stiften kann” (10). [And if we do speak of the beauty of Gothic, it is only because of the poverty of our language, which in this instance certainly conceals a very perceptible poverty in knowledge as well. The so-called beauty of Gothic is a modern misunderstanding. Its true greatness has so little to do with our current conception of art, which of necessity culminates in the idea of “beauty,” that an acceptance of the word for Gothic values can only cause confusion.” (11)]



words/figures in a “solid” rhetorical structure that is dizzyingly coextensive with its incomplete conceptual frame. The conceptual cathedral of Worringer’s argument is simultaneously intact and riddled with gaps, hence the delirium of reading Worringer’s writing. His key words (e. g., expression and life) continually oscillate between their conceptual and metaphorical functions, and the reading experience itself oscillates between the text’s florid, hyperbolic rhetorical presentation and the conceptual impasses that coincide with it point for point.

Worringer’s writing is also important for my theory of reading delirium because of the way the reading process itself is (at least implicitly) staged in the text. I argue that Worringer’s writing has an implicit performative dimension: he is not just presenting an art-historical argument about aesthetic drives, he is somehow also presenting those drives themselves in his writing. He gives voice, as it were, to his own historical and hermeneutic categories (abstraction and empathy) and the echo of their discord (Gothic expression). Moreover, according to his theory of style, to observe a particular work of art is equivalent to empathizing directly into the psycho-bio-existential nexus of need and will that determines the style of the work. The reading of Worringer’s own text attains a kind of stylistic immediacy in which the reader is forcibly “empathized” or “abstracted” into the words/concepts of the text that express themselves with an uncanny life of their own (e.g., the *Eigenausdruck* mentioned in the Introduction). The reading is thus driven out of the furrows as much as the writing: hence my term reading delirium.

## Part I: “Style” and “Presentation” in Worringer’s *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*

The problematic of Worringer’s texts begins with the relation of concept and word: a confused, but necessary relation between the rigor, specificity and depth of

concepts on the one hand, and the flexibility, ambiguity and superficiality of words on the other. If we examine our epigraph, we can begin to see the problem of this relation. The first sentence refers to the word “style,” which Worringer is attempting to define and put to work in his writing. Its usage and meaning may be highly elastic, but “precisely when concepts are missing, a word turns up at the just the right time.” A word, then, can be substituted not just for a concept, but also for a lack of concepts, a confusion of concepts, even their failure or impossibility. This substitution is possible because, in the wake of Nietzsche’s “Ausser Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne” [“On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense”], every concept always is—or originally was—just a word;<sup>92</sup> and if we find ourselves at a loss for concepts, Worringer ironically reminds us that we can simply stick to words for a time, as if they were the concepts themselves.

Reading Worringer we may be compelled by this relation between word and concept for two reasons. First, a deeply unsettling epistemological problem is entailed because we very quickly become uncertain where a word stops and its corresponding concept begins, and vice versa. Moreover it becomes perhaps even harder to know when a word is supposed to refer to a rigorous, definite concept and when it refers to a vague, fluid or, as Worringer says, “elastic” one. When Worringer writes about style (or life or expression), we read as if we know exactly what he means, while at the same time acknowledging that these most crucial concepts are the vaguest ones. We are forced to grant such words both argumentative precision and conceptual ambiguity if we are to make any sense at all of the text. In this way, the argument takes shape as a structure that, as I have suggested, is both intact and incomplete. When words and concepts are related to each other in this way (that is, when words both refer and cover up conceptual problems), they show the ultimate complicity of epistemological rigor

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<sup>92</sup> See especially I: 878-9.

and epistemological uncertainty when it comes to reading: the *Erkenntnisarmut* that underlies *Wortarmut*, to use Worringer's own terms.

Secondly, as much as this relation is a problem, it is also a possibility. The impasse of word and concept has a performative dimension. In the citation from *Faust*, the word "stellt sich ein" can signify "it puts itself in place," "posits," "sets to work," "adjusts," "arrives," "comes" (success, failure), "appears" (consequences, symptoms), "begins" (worry, trouble, pain).<sup>93</sup> We could even say that a word can make an entrance, as if on a stage, and then *act*, as if it were a concept. Words create movements that make a certain kind of thinking possible, even if that thinking is not exactly conceivable right away. Indeed, such words appear precisely *at the right time*; they are *punctual*, necessary, emergent, and they are set to work for the time being for the sake of some other need of thinking that demands a certain fluidity or elasticity of concepts. The question posed to reading by this performative dimension of various Worringerian words is how to detect and evaluate that other task of thinking in the delirious excess of the words on the page.

*Abstraktion und Einfühlung* proposes an anti-mimetic model of art history: rather than tracing the development of the human technical ability to reproduce reality, the book emphasizes (1) the dynamic interplay of psychological drives or needs that informs aesthetic activity and (2) the formal qualities that correspond to that psychological interplay, i.e. style. This relation of cultural psychology to style seems to constitute the object of *Stilpsychologie*, the academic discipline named in Worringer's subtitle.<sup>94</sup> As a kind of cultural psychologist, Worringer looks to history

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<sup>93</sup> I owe these semantic associations to Geoff Waite.

<sup>94</sup> For an account of Worringer's relation to this turn-of-the-century sub-discipline of art history and of the relation of *Stilpsychologie* itself to traditional aesthetics and parallel developments in literary and linguistic stylistics, see Karlheinz Barck's "Worringer's Stilpsychologie im Kontext der Stilforschung" in Hannes Böhringer and Beate Söntgen (Eds.) *Wilhelm Worringers Kunstgeschichte* (München: Fink, 2002), 23-34.

to identify distinct moments of *Kunstwollen*<sup>95</sup>, artistic volition, in which are activated the dominant psycho-existential needs of a culture. Likewise he looks to art to identify the styles that correspond to a given artistic will, measuring a culture's psychological and existential condition through the art that it in effect wills.

For Worringer artistic volition is composed of the dynamic confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*) of two psycho-existential needs: the need for abstraction and the need for empathy. The latter is associated with immanence, rationality, the organic, life and a "relation of familiarity or trust" (*Vertraulichkeitsverhältnis*) to the external world; the most straight-forward historical example is ancient Greece. The former is associated with transcendence, instinct, the inorganic, death, and a "feeling of fear or torment in regard to the external world" (*ungeheure geistige Raumscheu*); here his example is ancient Egypt. Summing up the theoretical exposition of these two drives, Worringer writes:

[. . .] Einfühlungsbedürfnis und Abstraktionsbedürfnis fanden wir als die zwei Polen menschlichen Kunstempfindens, soweit es rein ästhetischer Würdigung zugänglich ist. Es sind Gegensätze, die sich in Prinzip ausschließen. In Wirklichkeit aber stellt die Kunstgeschichte eine unaufhörliche Auseinandersetzung beider Tendenzen dar. (82)

[For we found the need for empathy and the need for abstraction to be the two poles of human artistic experience, in so far as it is accessible to purely aesthetic evaluation. They are antitheses which, in principle, are mutually exclusive. In actual fact, however, the history of art represents an unceasing disputation between the two tendencies. (45)]

Art history presents the continual coupling and confrontation of these two opposing needs, and art historians would be well advised (following Worringer's own example)

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<sup>95</sup> Worringer borrows and expands this term from Alois Riegl's *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901). Worringer repeatedly stresses his interest and intervention in the field of art history only on the question of *Kunstwollen*, not *Können*: thus he justifies his discussion of style in this very broad cultural and psychological sense, without necessary reference to specific artists, works of art, technical innovations, historical and political constellations, etc. His circular procedure is to use an a-historical cultural or racial type, and to theorize out of that a corresponding style; and *vice versa*, namely, to posit a hypothetical model of style and then to make certain typifying and a-historical claims about a culture or race as a whole.

to understand style as both the diachronic development and synchronic phenomenon of these two psychological needs. The text, then, would seem to proceed from the concept of style as an aesthetic manifestation of psychology (of the *Kunstwollen* and *Kunstbedürfnisse* of a given culture) and then to offer a theory of the history of art as the polar dynamism of that stylistic-psychological principle. However, this passage becomes more complicated if we put pressure on the word “present” (*darstellen*) and allow for the double meaning of *Kunstgeschichte* as, on the one hand, the empirical history of art and, on the other, the academic discipline of art history. The continual confrontation of these two drives is present throughout the empirical history of art, but is also that which is (to be) presented by the discipline of art history, by the practice of art-historical writing. A relation of correspondence is established between the writing of art history and the history of art itself: both present (*darstellen*) the confrontation of two fundamentally opposed drives. When Worringer adds “in Wirklichkeit” to his implicit definition of art history/history of art, that *reality* is simultaneously the empirical reality of art history and the textual reality of art historiography, i.e. the reading and writing of art history. As readers, we are invited to read this particular *Kunstgeschichte* according to the two levels on which it is apparently written: as a theoretical argument about style, and as the rhetorico-performative presentation of style itself.

Whether or not Worringer intends this other dimension to his text (indeed whether he is even aware of it) is an open question. We ought not to forget that Worringer is writing a dissertation, an academic exercise with a distinct purpose: namely that it be accepted by the academy and ensure the possibility of an academic career. This is not exactly a genre for experimentation, so why bother to inscribe this performative, super-stylistic dimension into the text? On the other hand, if Worringer does need to submit a passable dissertation, but at the same time passionately believes

in pursuing ideas and problems that might be profoundly unorthodox to the discipline of art history, the only way he could develop them would be precisely through such implicit or performative style of writing. A third possibility, and perhaps the most compelling one, would be that Worringer's radical stylization of art history is neither purely intentional, nor purely something read into the text, but rather a kind of impersonal cultural voice that speaks through Worringer without his conscious control, but only as a result of his aesthetic and historical-cultural sensibility and academic intuition.<sup>96</sup> A look at Worringer's reception seems to favor this possibility: often hailed (or condemned) as a fore-runner, ground-layer, spokesperson, theorist, high priest and prophet of the Expressionist movement, Worringer's books on ancient and Gothic art and architecture did indeed have a huge resonance—and readership—among contemporary artists and critics. Even Georg Lukács, who writes the most scathing critique of Worringer's first book, nevertheless sees in him the distilled essence of the ideology of the entire Expressionist movement.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the array of

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<sup>96</sup> On Worringer's relation to contemporary academic trends Barck makes the following remark: "Sah Worringer in Riegls *Spätromischer Kunstindustrie* ein Werk, das 'die stärkste Bresche in dieses (kunstmaterialistische) System legte,' so sind seine eigenen stilpsychologischen Applikationen des Riegl'schen 'Kunstwollen' doch durch noch wenig aufgeklärte implizite Gedanken der zeitgenössischen sprachwissenschaftlichen Stilforschung, wie auch durch anthropologische und ethnologische (völkerpsychologische im Sinne Heymann Steinthals) vermittelt und geprägt worden. Dabei handelt es sich nicht um Einflüsse, sondern eher um eine 'atmosphärische,' beinahe palimpsestartige und darum schwer zu ortende Beziehung im Oeuvre Worringers." (26-7) Worringer's works make references to only a handful of other scholars, but nevertheless participate in a palimpsest-like intellectual atmosphere, whereby Worringer may be misusing or plagiarizing other thinkers (e.g. Theodor Lipps, Simmel, Dilthey, Nietzsche etc.) without realizing it. For an account of Worringer's (ideologically motivated) misreading of his (implicit and explicit) sources, see again Geoff Waite's article "Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*: Remarks on its Reception and on the Rhetoric of its Criticism" in *Invisible Cathedrals* (Ed. Donahue).

<sup>97</sup> In his 1934 essay, "Größe und Verfall des Expressionismus" (reprinted in *Probleme des Realismus*. Berlin: Aufbau, 1955) Lukács condemns Worringer and *pars pro toto* the entire Expressionist movement. His method of ideological search-and-destroy depends, unwittingly, on the same tacit or implicit voice that I am attempting to draw out in this paper. He writes: "Wilhelm Worringer, dessen tiefe weltanschauliche Verbundenheit mit der expressionistischen Bewegung wir aus seiner 'Grabrede' [Worringer's 1921 essay 'Künstlerische Zeitfragen'] ersuchen konnte, spricht das in seinem für die ganze Theorie grundlegenden Buch: 'Abstraktion und Einfühlung' (München 1909) ganz deutlich aus. Die 'Abstraktion' (also die Kunst des 'Wesens') steht hier im scharfen Gegensatz zur Kunst der 'Einfühlung,' unter der – wenn das auch nicht ausgesprochen wird – vor allem die naturalistische-impressionistische Kunst der unmittelbaren Vergangenheit und Gegenwart zu verstehen ist. Die Polemik Worringers ist nur auf der Oberfläche kunstgeschichtlich [...] (159). Worringer is deeply

self-mythologizing prefaces that mark the multiple editions of Worringer's dissertation and habilitation suggest that even Worringer saw himself as a vessel or vehicle of the artistic and intellectual forces of his contemporary moment.<sup>98</sup> And there is no shortage of scholars and critics, from Albert Soergel's 1925 edition of *Dichtung und Dichter der Zeit: Im Banne des Expressionismus* to Claudia Öhlschläger's 2005 *Abstraktionsdrang: Wilhelm Worringer und der Geist der Moderne*, who see in Worringer's thought a nexus of all the dominant philosophical, aesthetic, historiographical, anthropological and sociological discourses of his day.<sup>99</sup> What I suggest here is the more radical possibility that, beyond the level of influence or discursive belonging, the voice that speaks in and through Worringer's text is the voice of the very *Kunstbedürfnisse* of his contemporary moment displaced onto an art-historical past, that is, the voice of *Kunstwollen* itself: the abstract life that is ceaselessly presented in the history of art.

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connected to the Expressionist movement, a connection which, Lukács claims, is very clearly pronounced (*spricht sich ganz deutlich aus*) in the book that lays the foundation for the entire theory, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*. But in the very next sentence we read that contemporary artistic trends are not addressed directly (*nicht ausgeprochen wird*) in the text; that its representative capacity for the Expressionist movement is only to be tacitly understood (*zu verstehen ist*); and that its polemic is only art-historical on the surface. Lukács' critique in fact depends upon precisely the kind of textual complexity that he wants to reduce away. It is the task of this present chapter to interrogate precisely the textual dimensions that Lukács disavows and reduces, even if similar conclusions may be reached in the end.

<sup>98</sup> This becomes especially clear in Worringer's 1948 preface, in which he describes his by now well-known encounter with Georg Simmel at the Trocadero Museum in Paris. For more on this encounter, see first Geoff Waite, "Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*," pp. 30-1; Mary Gluck, "Interpreting Primitivism, Mass Culture and Modernism: The Making of Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*" NGC, No. 80, Special Issue on the Holocaust. (Spring–Summer, 2000), pp. 149-169; Siegfried K. Lang, "Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*: Entstehung und Bedeutung" in *Wilhelm Worringer's Kunstgeschichte*. Ed. Hannes Böhringer und Beate Söntgen. München: Wilhelm Fink, 2002; and Claudia Öhlschläger, *Abstraktionsdrang: Wilhelm Worringer und der Geist der Moderne*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005, p. 15 and ff.

<sup>99</sup> See Soergel, pp. 387-91, and Öhlschläger, p. 39 and ff.

## Part II: “Style,” “Life” and “Expression” from *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* to *Formprobleme der Gotik*

We have seen how two keywords, *Kunstgeschichte* and *Darstellung*, can double, if not treble, the register of Worringer’s writing. They create the possibility that this academic treatise in fact allows the invented psychology of a past culture (Egyptian, Greek or Gothic) to speak through it, and moreover, that this ghostly voice also speaks for the psychological needs of European culture itself at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This polyphony of voices is *presented* in the text, that is, put “there” (*da*), somewhere in the history/story that Worringer attempts to tell. Having suggested how this voice (the fictive voice of *Kunstwollen*) might be presented in Worringer’s text, I want to turn now to the presentation of the artistic volition’s corresponding concept: *style*, and finally to the most extreme form of the conceptual paradox of style, which is for him *expression*.

For Worringer the presentation of style (in the double sense of its presentation throughout the history of art *and* in art historiography) is, ultimately and fundamentally, non-intelligible: the navel of human experience and culture. The will to art and its stylistic effects are mysteriously and permanently separated from conscious intention and explanation, originating and operating elsewhere, dimly, intuitively, primordially. Worringer speculates that the first artistic abstractions were a purely instinctual creation (*reine Instinktschöpfung*) and that the need for abstraction had at first nothing to do with the conscious reproduction of geometric laws of composition, but stemmed instead from a much deeper and more mysterious source.

Dieser Drang mußte seine erste Befriedigung in der reinen geometrischen Abstraktion finden, welche, von allem äußeren Weltzusammenhang erlöst, eine Beglückung darstellt, die ihre geheimnisvolle Erklärung nicht im Intellekt des Betrachtenden, sondern in den tiefsten Wurzeln seiner körperlich-seelischen Konstitution findet. (70-1)



[This urge was bound to find its first satisfaction in pure geometric abstraction, which, set free from all external connections with the world, represents a felicitation whose mysterious transfiguration emanates not from the observer's intellect, but from the deepest roots of his somato-psychic constitution. (35)]

The first geometric abstractions must have presented an aesthetic gratification that could only be explained by appealing to the deepest physical and mental constitution of the observer. If one follows those physical and mental roots deep enough, one finds that they do not even belong to a body or a soul anymore, but rather to inorganic nature: static, inexorable, eternal. Worringer thus eradicates not only the role of the intellect, but also the notions of life and organism in aesthetic experience:

Es muß vielmehr auch hier angenommen werden, daß jedes geistige Verhältnis seine physische Bedeutung habe, und auf die kommt es hier wohl an. Ein überzeugter Evolutionist könnte sie mit aller Vorsicht in der schließlichen Verwandschaft der Bildungsgesetze organischer und anorganischer Natur suchen. Er würde dann die ideale Forderung aufstellen, daß in unserem menschlichen Organismus das Bildungsgesetz der anorganischen Natur noch wie eine leise Erinnerung nachklinge. Er würde vielleicht auch weiter behaupten, daß jede Differenzierung der organisierten Materie, jede Weiterbildung ihrer primitivsten Form von einer Spannung, sozusagen von einer Rückwärtssehnsucht nach dieser primitivsten Form begleitet sei und er würde zur Bekräftigung auf den entsprechenden Widerstand hinweisen, den die Natur gegen jede Differenzierung dadurch äußert, daß mit der Höherentwicklung des Organismus die Schmerzen des Gebärens wachsen. In der Betrachtung der abstrakten Gesetzmäßigkeit würde dann also der Mensch gleichsam von dieser Spannung erlöst und im Genusse seiner einfachsten Formel, seines letzten Bildungsgesetz von seiner Differenzierung ausruhen. Der Geist wäre dann nur der Vermittler dieser höheren Beziehungen. (71-2)

[It must rather be assumed here too that every spiritual attitude has its physical significance and that this must be the issue here. A convinced evolutionist might, with all circumspection, seek it in the ultimate affinity between the morphological laws of organic and inorganic nature. He would then erect the ideal postulate that the morphological law of inorganic nature still echoes like a dim memory in our human organism. He would then perhaps also assert further that every differentiation of organised matter, every development of its most primitive form, is accompanied by a tension, by a longing to revert to this most primitive form so to speak, and in corroboration he would

point to the corresponding resistance which nature evinces to all differentiation through the fact that the more highly evolved the organism the greater are the pains it experiences in parturition. Thus, in the contemplation of abstract regularity man would be, as it were, delivered from this tension and at rest from his differentiation in the enjoyment of his simplest formula, of his ultimate morphological law. The spirit would then be merely the instrumental provider of these higher relationships. (35-6)]

Worringer persistently disassociates the intellect (*Geist*) from artistic activity: intellect is only a mediator between the body and the art-work, and only in the body does art have its real effect.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, Worringer assumes that there is a fundamental affinity between the laws of organic formation and inorganic nature such that the organic body (with its mediating intellect) is at best a secondary formation (*Weiterbildung*) or differentiation (*Differenzierung*) from inorganic nature; and abstract art only confirms the primordially of the inorganic over the organic. Abstraction in art is the *echo* of inorganic nature that reminds us, painfully, that every notion of intellectual “progress” and organic “growth” is felt, at this deeper bodily level, as pain and longing for the primordial simplicity of inorganic form. Every new birth, every human step forward gives rise to a need and a will to step backwards and outwards, a need whose gratification is felt by and is present to the body (in its deepest, primordial constitution), but never to the intellect.

All of the subtle ways that Worringer hedges his claims here (e.g., foregrounding the assumption, hypothesizing a token evolutionist, excessive use of the subjunctive and qualifiers like “vielleicht,” “sozusagen,” and “gleichsam”) indicate that this is a tenuous, but crucial part of his argument. This passage also makes use of

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<sup>100</sup> Worringer substantially revises this point in the Gothic book, in which *Geist*, rather than being a relegated to a secondary, mediating role, becomes the unattainable goal of Gothic art: namely the transformation of sensuous space into spirit: *Vergeistigung des Raumes*. Although the terms have changed, the structure of the impasse remains the same in both texts: in *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* it is an *Auseinandersetzung* of organic life and inorganic form, in *Formprobleme der Gotik* it is spirit pitted against space. In both books, as we will see, *expression* remains the ceaseless, delirious movement of overcoming and oscillation of opposites.

the explanatory powers of the inexplicable, of the appeal to the inexplicable as the last word of every coherent explanation. Precisely because the will to art and its stylistic effects present themselves (and are presented) as manifestations of an unintelligible, mysterious bio-existential longing, more need not be said. It suffices merely to mention the enigma of the inorganic, the inchoate allure of primitive, irrational longing.

If the task of art history is the presentation of such a need (irrational, unknowable, inexplicable), then we have to emphasize that presentation itself involves the indirect evocation of the ceaseless mystery of art, namely the contradictory relation (*Auseinandersetzung*) between organic human life and non-organic form. Such a mystery, although it may be unknowable, is not necessarily unspeakable. To present it, to make it seen, felt and heard (but never directly visible, sensible or audible), requires, both in art and in art history, *style*, i.e., the formal qualities that are necessary for the limitation *and* expression of the will that wants to overcome them. Style, thus defined, is the conceptual paradox that lurks in the background when Worringer uses the word “presentation.” Style is the (un)speakable movement of thought that (un)speaks (*entspricht*) artistic need and artistic will. It is the possibility of an impossible voice that one hears in certain Worringerian words that present themselves at just the right time. Indeed, the auditory metaphor (of voice, of sound, of music) is the echo of the singular success and failure of Worringer’s discourse.

This success and failure is sounded most clearly in the word “expression,” which forms the hidden center of Worringer’s “polar” argument. Let us take a step back and examine these two poles. On one side is empathetic art (e.g., Greek art), whose task is to reflect the relation of trust and familiarity between man and world through the intensification of organic form. On the other side is abstract art (e.g., Egyptian), whose task is to dispel the dread of space, the threatening chaos of the outer

world, the caprice of organic life: in short to translate the chaos and caprice of space into art works of regular geometric form based on inorganic, crystalline laws of composition (*Bildungsgesetze*). But the role of the inorganic in abstract art poses a serious problem for the supposed “polar” opposition between Abstraktion und Einfühlung, as the following example suggests. In the first section of the “practical part” of *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, Worringer discusses at length the stylistic problem of ornamentation. He attempts to explain how the earliest and most abstract styles of ornamentation (pure linear-inorganic) developed into a seemingly organic and empathetic style of *plant* ornamentation. He claims that the organic appearance of the plant ornament is *not* the result of a mimetic process, but rather of the effect of the very same drive for abstraction that also produces non-representative, abstract ornamental lines. What is presented in the plant ornament is not an organic, natural ideal (*Naturvorbild*), but only the abstract regularity that composes the plant’s outer formation (*die Gesetzmäßigkeit ihrer äußeren Bildung*). Only belatedly, Worringer says, does the abstract plant ornament become “naturalized” and speak to the human need for empathy. Naturalism and organicism in style are only belated, derivative moments of the style of abstraction, just as the very quality of organic life itself would seem to be a derivative of a primary, underlying inorganic vitality. He writes:

Beide Stile, lineare wie vegatable Ornamentik, stellen also im Grunde eine Abstraktion dar und ihre Verschiedenheit ist in diesem Sinne eigentlich nur eine graduelle, wie die organische Gesetzmäßigkeit für eine monistische Anschauung auch im letzten Grunde nur graduell verschieden von der anorganischen-kristallinen ist. Für uns kommt es nur auf den Wert an, den diese graduelle Verschiedenheit der Stile in bezug auf das Problem Einfühlung oder Abstraktion hat. (97-8)

[Both styles, linear as well as vegetal ornament, thus represent at bottom an abstraction, and their diversity is, in this sense, really only one of degree; just as, in the eyes of a monist, organic regularity, in the last analysis, differs only in degree from that of the inorganic-crystalline. We are concerned only with the value this difference of degree possesses in relation to the problem of empathy or abstraction.

(60-1)]

The organic life represented by the plant ornament is, at the deepest psychological level, not life at all, but rather the outward, living appearance of a dead structure. The living thing, the disavowed *Naturvorbild*, is stripped of its organic life, and that “life” becomes a kind of visual cipher for the inorganic principle of its form. Paradoxically the artwork itself becomes an organism, full or possessed of that same uncanny “life” that is only to be distinguished *by degree* from the regularity of lifeless matter. Thus we see a crucial disjunction between what Worringer *says* with his argument and what he *does* with it. When he insists that the continuity between the organic and the inorganic is only of value insofar as it pertains to the problem of empathy and abstraction, he both affirms and overlooks the fact that his entire polar or antithetical argument rests upon a mysterious, unintelligible *continuum* of opposites (that navel of thought where the conscious life of the mind is knotted together with the unconscious, inorganic undeadness of the body), *not* their polar or antithetical opposition. Because he has defined his terms in such a way as to be defended and sustained by their own conceptual ambiguity, his bipolar argument can *appear* quite logically and conceptually coherent. However, it is precisely what lurks in that obscure, uncanny overlap of opposites that forms the real center of Worringer’s presentation: the word *expression* as it is applied to the art and architecture of the Gothic peoples.

What Worringer *says* is how abstraction delivers man from existential pain, how existential confusion is clarified into form. The (constative) thesis that he argues is that the bio-existential dynamic between abstraction and empathy drives the development of style art history. But what he *does* is to decompose precisely the formal, conceptual unity of his argument and release a non-conceptual *tertium quid*: Gothic expression. Just as the plant ornament becomes a visual cipher for non-organic life, so does Worringer’s text become a conceptual riddle of non-conceptual thought.

Likewise, just as abstraction in style, precisely in flattening the object along the two dimensions of length and width, allows an entirely other dimension to be presented; so does Worringer's text need to reduce itself to two antithetical poles (abstraction and empathy) for this irrational non-conceptual thinking to emerge out of their decomposed elements. Only in his explicit passages on Gothic expression do the text's constative and performative dimensions finally —almost— coincide.

Although the paradoxical concepts of life and style are unintelligible and inconceivable, Worringer argues that Gothic art intuitively grasps these concepts as problems and cannot get free of them. From the Gothic perspective, the complete release theorized as artistic abstraction becomes impossible. Instead abstraction leads only to an intensification of the contradiction, not to redemption. Thus the *Auseinandersetzung* of organic need and inorganic form can only be ceaselessly *expressed* in art, but never resolved. Concluding his discussion of ornamentation, he writes:

Trotz der rein linearen anorganischen Grundlage dieser [gotischen] Ornamentik zögern wir, sie eine abstrakte zu nennen. Vielmehr ist in diesem Liniengewirr ein unruhiges Leben nicht zu verkennen. Diese Unruhe, dieses Suchen hat kein organisches Leben, das uns sanft in seine Bewegung mit hineinzieht, aber Leben ist da, ein starkes, hasterfülltes, das uns zwingt, glücklos seinen Bewegungen zu folgen. Also auf anorganischer Grundlage eine gesteigerte Bewegung, ein gesteigerter Ausdruck. (115-6)

[In spite of the purely linear, inorganic basis of this [Gothic] ornamental style, we hesitate to term it abstract. Rather it is impossible to mistake the restless life contained in this tangle of lines. Thus unrest, this seeking, has no organic life that draws us gently into its movement; but there is life there, a vigorous, urgent life, that compels us joylessly to follow its movements. Thus, on an inorganic fundament, there is heightened movement, heightened expression. (76-7)]

Expression is the name Worringer gives to the stylistic contradiction (neither abstract nor empathetic, but the asymptotic escalation of one through the other) that answers to the existential contradiction tormenting the Gothic *Kunstwollen*. Attaining neither the immanent and vital fullness of the Greek, nor the transcendental stone-cold abstraction

of the Egyptian, yet striving for both, Gothic art expresses the incommensurability between the two through a movement of ceaseless oscillation and escalation. Where no synthesis is possible, Gothic art strives rather to translate (*übertragen*) the two, to carry one over to the meet the other in a relation of impossible correspondence; to breathe life into the *rigor mortis* of eternal abstraction, to monumentalize the transience of the living. The result is expression: a restless movement of energies (*Kräftebewegung*), a stylistic striving that Worringer characterizes as an intensity, tumult or striving, and to which he attributes an uncanny, inorganic life. The following description of a Gothic cathedral is typical of Worringer's concept of expression:

Beim gotischen Dom dagegen lebt die Materie nur von ihren eignen mechanischen Gesetzen; diese Gesetze aber sind trotz ihres abstrakten Grundcharakters lebendig geworden, d.h. sie haben einen Ausdruck bekommen. Der Mensch hat sein Einfühlungsvermögen auf mechanische Werte übertragen. Das sind ihm nun keine tote Abstraktion mehr, sondern eine lebendige Kräftebewegung. Und nur in dieser gesteigerten Kräftebewegung, die in der Intensität des Ausdrucks über alle organische Bewegung hinausgeht, vermag der nordische Mensch sein durch innere Disharmonie ins Pathetische gesteigertes Ausdrucksbedürfnis zu befriedigen. Ergriffen von Taumel dieser aus allen Enden hervordringenden, in mächtigem Krescendo gegen Himmel strebenden Orchestermusik mechanischer Kräfte fühlt er in seligem Schwindel sich kramphaft emporgerissen, sich hoch über sich selbst hinaus ins Unendliche gesteigert. (155-6)<sup>101</sup>

[In the Gothic cathedral, on the contrary, matter lives solely on its own mechanical laws; but these laws, despite their fundamentally abstract character, have become living, i.e. they have acquired expression. Man has transferred his capacity for empathy onto mechanical values. Now they are no longer a dead abstraction to him, but a living movement of forces. And only in this heightened movement of forces, which in their intensity of expression surpass all organic motion, was Northern man able to gratify his need for expression, which had been intensified to the point of pathos by inner disharmony. Gripped by the frenzy of these

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<sup>101</sup> In addition to reminding us of the Nietzsche passage from the end of the previous chapter, Worringer's descriptions of Gothic cathedrals also recall Goethe's essays on architecture, particularly "Von deutscher Baukunst" (1773) and (1823). See Joseph Masheck, "Abstraction and Empathy: Crystalline Form in Expressionism and in the Minimalism of Tony Smith" in Donahue (Ed) *Invisible Cathedrals*, p. 43; and Lang, "Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*" in Böhrringer/Söntgen (Eds) *Wilhelm Worringer's Kunstgeschichte*, p. 110.

mechanical forces, that thrust out at all their terminations and aspire toward heaven in a mighty crescendo of orchestral music, he feels himself convulsively drawn aloft in blissful vertigo, raised high above himself into the infinite. (112-3)]

Here, and in other such passages, it is not the life of an organism that confronts us, but rather that of a mechanism: “Nicht das Leben eines Organismus tritt uns entgegen, sondern das eines Mechanismus” (158). The mechanical laws of inorganic nature *express* an uncanny vitality and an uncanny pathos upon the viewer. Expression is thus itself a kind of life that emerges between the viewer and the work, between the dead lines, forces, movements of the work and their vivifying perception by the viewer, a perception that is also the uncanny recognition of the same inorganic forces that are active and constitutive of the viewer’s own organic life. In expression there is no polar opposition between life and matter (nor, by analogy, between abstraction and empathy); rather there is only a ceaselessly shifting differential in which life functions as the asymptotal limit of matter, and *vice versa*. Life is the expressive interplay of forces between the dead structure of a Gothic cathedral and the equally dead structure of its living, organic viewer: life is what animates the geometry and stone of the cathedral to the point where it strives to *become* space, not merely occupy it. Likewise, life is what captures and overwhelms the spectator of the cathedral, forcing him to that unthinkable, inconceivable point where his intellect crashes up against its inorganic, material limit, the limit it shares with the cathedral itself.

The expressive movement of vivified forces is a movement without direction, development, or end: a line of pure intensity, of constant interruption and detour, of tumult and vertigo.<sup>102</sup> It is barely a line at all, in fact, it is barely *visible*, but rather only a marker of invisible forces: Worringer exhausts this metaphor (just as the Gothic line

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<sup>102</sup> This is the line of Worringer’s work that Gilles Deleuze traces in his book on Francis Bacon: sensation happens when one paints or see such a “Gothic line” (see pp. 40-1). The Worringerian Gothic line appears in various guises and contexts in Deleuze’s work, most notably as the nomad line and the line of flight in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Co-authored with Félix Guattari. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.



exhausts its own potential precisely when it is at the point of renewing it) and is forced to use other metaphors to express the paradoxical nonconceptual *power* of expression: in the above passage it is the powerful crescendo of orchestral music.<sup>103</sup> This metaphor is repeated in the penultimate paragraph of the book, in which the Gothic style rings out its full and final symphonic tones in the gothic-baroque style of drapery (*Gewandstil*), a form characterized by the interplay of (organic) human figure and (abstract) ornamentation:

In jener Entwicklungsphase der Gotik, die wir das gotische Barock nennen und deren Vertreter wir hauptsächlich in Süddeutschland finden, raffte sich die Musik des Gewandes zu einer letzten volltönenden Symphonie zusammen. (164)

[In that phase of the development which we call Gothic Baroque, and whose representatives are mainly to be found in South Germany, the music of drapery drew together into a last full-toned symphony. (120)]

But the organic, naturalistic, empathetic style of the Renaissance is already pressing in, and once the human figure becomes dominant in this style, the gothic has already sung its swan song:

Der gotische Gewandstil hatte ausgeklungen, und mit ihm war die letzte Erinnerung an den Ausgangspunkt des nordischen Kunstschaffens, an jenes System abstrakten und gleichzeitig expressiven Lineaments erloschen. Nachdem es sich glücklich und auf vielen Umwegen zu organischer Klarheit durchgearbeitet hatte, verlor es seine Existenzberechtigung und wurde aus der Entwicklung ausgeschaltet. (164)

[The last echo of the Gothic drapery style had faded away, and with it the last reminiscence of the starting-point of Northern artistic creation, of that system of delineation which was at once abstract and expressive, was extinguished. Having worked its way, felicitously and along many detours, to organic lucidity, it had lost its *raison d'être* and was

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<sup>103</sup> Claudia Öhlschläger attributes this musical metaphor to the triangular influence of Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche on the modernist (and therefore on Worringer's) conception of music as the abstract-expressive art form *par excellence*. See p. 83 in her *Abstraktionsdrang: Wilhelm Worringer und der Geist der Moderne* (2005). See also the chapter "Music and Existence" in Walter Sokel's classic study, *The Writer in Extremis: Expressionism in Twentieth-Century German Literature*. Stanford, 1959, where Sokel argues that a fundamentally musical aesthetic grounds modernism's shift away from mimesis to abstraction. Below I show that this musical metaphor also has a particular significance for Worringer's writing.

eliminated from the further course of evolution. (120)]

Somehow the Gothic will-to-art finds its way out of the impasse of expression and attains, in the Renaissance style, the transfiguration of organic form. But one cannot help but feel a tinge of bitterness underlying the Renaissance's "happy" attainment of organic clarity, and the overall mood of the concluding paragraph is one of elegy for what will remain forever lost of this great, uncanny Gothic tradition:

Wer annähernd empfunden hat, was alles in dieser Unnatürlichkeit [des gotischen Stils] liegt, der wird bei aller Freude über die neuen Glücksmöglichkeiten, die die Renaissance schuf, sich mit großer Trauer dessen bewußt bleiben, was mit diesem Siege des Organischen, des Natürlichen an großen durch eine ungeheure Tradition geweihten Werten auf immer verloren ging. (164-5)

[Whoever has felt, in some degree, all that is contained in this unnaturalness, despite his joy at the new possibilities of felicity created by the Renaissance, will remain conscious, with deep regret, of all the great values hallowed by an immense tradition that were lost forever with this victory of the organic, of the natural. (120-1)]

The tone of the conclusion lies quite far afield from the sober, academic terrain sketched out in the opening paragraphs of the text. Although Worringer's point of departure is a polar model of aesthetic sensibility that drives the history of art, the unfolding of his text suggests that it is not the polar model itself that he is compelled to explore, but rather that uncanny moment of contradiction between the two poles which in fact destroys the entire model. However the text may represent itself (as an art-historical treatise, a work of psychological aesthetics etc), what it *presents* is a sustained struggle with a certain impasse of thought and language, of word and concept, of living organism and dead matter. It is a theory of aesthetic perception that is simultaneously an implicit theory of language and conceptuality. It is also necessarily the practice or *presentation* of that theory, and its results are a radically unstable figuration of thought and sensation (Gothic expression) and a concept of non-organic life, both of which seem to emerge and speak with a life and voice of their

own.

### Part III: A Dead End and a Way Out

At the end of Worringer's first book, Gothic expression has exhausted itself. From the perspective of our reading (which proceeded from the problematic interplay of word and concept) we have uncovered a shifting, self-consuming metaphoric of polarity that turns inevitably toward the figure of expression. But we are repeating our problem if we think we can simply "name" the central figure of this text. If the whole shifting ground of this reading is the ambiguous relation between concept and word, then the *real* figure that operates in our text (and in Worringer's) is *catachresis*, the term for rhetorical abuse: mixed metaphors and inappropriate, inadequate or inconsistent usage. When Worringer says that the structure of a Gothic cathedral is striving towards heaven, he is using a metaphor. When he says the cathedral is *orchestral music* striving towards heaven, he is mixing metaphors and creating a special kind of catachresis: that which he mis-expresses could not be expressed in any other way. Worringer's catachresis is the necessarily inadequate use of language to express a conceptual problem which seems to foreclose adequate expression in its essence.

Where can one go with a concept like expression? It seems to be a historical dead-end, just as it is a figural one. As soon as Worringer exhausts the mis-metaphor of expression, his book comes to a close. However, in *Form in Gothic*, which is the supplementary re-working (*ergänzende Überarbeitung*) of the material of *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, we have the chance to see how the dead-end of expression might be reconnected to the conceptual and disciplinary frames which give rise to it.

The aural metaphor plays an even more substantial role in the Gothic book. Style is always pronounced in this text (*sich aussprechen*), and it corresponds

(*entsprechen*) to artistic will. Art itself is a *Liniensprache* that one listens to as much as looks at. The musical metaphors grow even richer and more specific: visual works possess rhythm and harmony, fermatas, accents, crescendos; Gothic lines are described as an infinite melody, as a visual echo, as “das Fortissimo der Raummusik.” Indeed, the central problem of the Gothic book is, explicitly, catachresis: the failure of the Gothic line (in the double sense) to find adequate expression in visual or spatial form is figured by the turn to aural metaphors. That which constitutes and frustrates Gothic style is form, matter, life itself, all of which Worringer opposes to spirit (*Geist*). Gothic architecture strives to transcend matter and become pure spirit, pure space, pure inorganic regularity. Matter is de-materialized, lines are de-geometrified; but the transcendence is never completed, it is from the outset the impossible horizon of the Gothic will that must nevertheless remain bound to bodies and material. As a result, the Gothic will rages and rages against its own inner limit, from which it draws both its initially vital, expressive power and its ultimately cold, dead impotence. Its transcendence is only to be achieved indirectly, to be evoked, to be presented in the sense that Worringer himself presents “style” in *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*. The excessive, unnamable element of the text, the conceptual dimension that remains necessarily inconceivable, but nevertheless bound to the words eventually transforms itself into aural metaphors. If the transcendent vision cannot be seen, it will have to be heard. “Wenn wir nach der Betrachtung nordischer Ornamentik die Augen schliessen, bleibt nur der nachklingende Eindruck einer körperlosen unendlichen Bewegtheit“ (37) [If, after contemplating Northern ornament, we close our eyes, all that remains to us is a lingering [echoing] impression of a formless, ceaseless activity” (56)]. Hence, the music, voices and echoes as the central mixed metaphoric of the text, the echo of catachresis itself as the Gothic line, forever denied freedom, searches ceaselessly for a way out.

As Worringer elaborates certain aspects of his dissertation in the book on the Gothic, we see that principle new term to characterize Gothic art is *Eigenausdruck*, by which Worringer means the violent subjection of the spectator before the expressive power (*Ausdrucksmacht*) of the Gothic line. The radical inverse of empathy (in which the spectator externalizes himself into the work of art), the radical self-expression of Gothic art that imposes itself violently on the viewer. He writes:

Der Ausdruck der nordischen Ornamentik ist dagegen nicht unmittelbar von uns abhängig, wir begegnen vielmehr einem Leben, das unabhängig von uns zu sein scheint, das mit Forderungen an uns herantritt und uns zu einer Bewegtheit zwingt, der wir uns nur widerwillig unterwerfen. Kurz: die nordische Linie lebt nicht von einem Eindruck, den wir ihr willig geben, sondern sie scheint einen *Eigenausdruck* zu haben, der stärker ist als unser Leben. (32)

[On the other hand, the expression of Northern ornament does not directly depend upon us; we are met rather by a vitality which appears to be independent of us, which challenges us, forcing upon us an activity to which we submit only against our will. In short, the Northern line does not get its life from any impress which we willingly give it, but appears to have an *expression of its own*, which is stronger than our life. (41)]

The Nordic line only *appears* to have its “auto-expression,” but since expression exceeds the relation of subject and object, then the “subjective” appearance of the monstrous life of the “object” *is* precisely that life. Here might we not speculate that, *mutatis mutandis*, the voice of the Gothic volition itself speaks through Worringer’s writing? That a disembodied, undead *Kunstwollen* achieves its “auto-expression” in and through Worringer’s writing, intensifying the relation between author and text, reader and text, past and present, historical and literary presentation? That Worringer, the art historian, merely creates the conditions by which his writing will be overpowered by the artistic will itself, and it is precisely his historical task to ventriloquize that voice out of past? At least this is the possibility—however uncanny, solipsistic or preposterous it may be—that is suggested by the duplicity of Worringer’s writing.

Worringer employs a “banal experience from everyday life” to illustrate the not-at-all-banal way in which this *Eigenausdruck* can be seen to function in his own writing. He asks the reader to imagine picking up a pencil and sketching out a series of beautiful curved lines. In doing this we seem to experience a feeling of pleasure from the free, uninterrupted movement of our wrist, and this pleasure is translated (*übertragen*) onto the line as its *Ausdruck*, its expression, which corresponds (*entspricht*) to the feeling of pleasure experienced in the act of drawing the line in the first place (32-3). Even should we encounter such a beautiful or organic line that we ourselves did not draw, we would nevertheless feel as if we ourselves had drawn it and we would re-experience the feeling of pleasure that is expressed in the line.

“Begegnen wir einer solchen Linie in einer anderen Darstellung, so ist unser Eindruck derselbe, als ob wir sie selbst gezeichnet hätten. Denn sobald wir überhaupt eine Linie in unser Bewußtsein aufnehmen, fühlen wir innerlich unwillkürlich den Vorgang ihrer Entstehung nach.“ (33) [“If we meet such a line in another composition, we experience the same impression as if we ourselves had drawn it. For directly we admit a line to our consciousness at all, we unconsciously feel inwardly the process of its formation.” (42)]. Expression in this “banal” sense is the sensuously perceivable reconstruction of a mental state, the sensible trace of a spiritual condition with which we cannot help but identify, whether the trace is left by us, or by another. In the moment of perception, we become the author of every line we see, and we feel, compulsively, the same forces that created and were created by that line. And if, Worringer adds, in a state of inner excitement that can only be expressed on paper, we again take a pencil in our hand, then “wird eine starre, eckige, immer wieder unterbrochene, zackige Linie von stärkster Ausdruckswucht entstehen” (33) [“there will be a hard, angular, ceaselessly interrupted, jagged line, of the most powerful vehemence of expression” (42)]. And

the perception of that line immediately forces upon us the turbulent mental state that gave rise to it:

Denn auch hier schreiben wir die bei der Apperzeption der Linie nachgefühlten Entstehungsvorgänge ihr als Ausdruck zu. Und da die Linie uns ihren Ausdruck aufzudrängen scheint, empfinden wir ihn als etwas Selbständiges, von uns Unabhängiges und sprechen deshalb von einem Eigenausdruck der Linie. (34)

[For here, too, we ascribe to the line as expression the sensation of the process of its execution felt afterwards at the moment of its apperception. And as the line appears to impose its expression upon us, we perceive it as something absolute, independent of us, and therefore we speak of a specific expression [auto-expression] of the line. (43)]

Thus, looking approximates drawing in Worringer just as reading approximates writing for Benn. The perception of such a line only recapitulates the urgency of its drawing. There is no room for interpretation or analysis of such lines: they possess (or are possessed by) an uncanny immediacy. “Ins Unheimliche, Phantastische ist alles gewandelt. Hinter der Sichtbarkeit der Dinge lauert ihr Zerrbild, hinter der Leblosigkeit der Dinge ein unheimliches, gespenstisches Leben, und alles Wirkliche wird zum Grotesken“ (53) [“Everything becomes weird and fantastic. Behind the visible appearance of a thing lurks its caricature, behind the lifelessness of a thing an uncanny, ghostly life, and so all actual things become grotesque” (81-2)]. This is the point (the non-point, the point that is everywhere—and nowhere—in such a line) where the hermeneutic circle of Worringer’s writing closes in on itself. Instead of a *Kunstwollen* that gives rise to a certain style, or a style that sheds light on its corresponding will (the circular method that ostensibly drives these two texts), the will and the style are in fact interchangeable according to the *life* that they share: the same life that is “in” the work itself, in its genesis and in its author, in its perception and in its perceiver. The auto-expression of the line is its cause and effect, its past and its present, its subject and its object. And since Worringer’s text consists of nothing more than the tracing of such lines, then we have to assert the tautology that: the Gothic line

that Worringer describes in his texts *is* the Gothic line that Worringer describes in his texts.

Das Wesentliche dieses Eigenausdrucks der Linie ist, dass er nicht sinnlich-organische Werte repräsentiert, sondern Werte unsinnlicher, d.h. geistiger Art. Nicht organische Willenstätigkeit spricht sich in ihm aus, sondern eine psychisch-geistige Willenstätigkeit, die noch fern von aller Verbindung und Versöhnung mit organischen Empfindungskomplexen ist. (34)

[The essence of this specific expression [auto-expression] of the line is, that it does not represent sensuous, organic values, but values of a non-sensuous, that is to say, a spiritual kind. It does not express organic activity of will, but a psychical, spiritual activity of will, far removed from any connection or conformity with the complexes of organic sensation. (43)]

Only now the expression does not resonate with our own organic being and capacity for empathy, but with inorganic being and non-sensuous desire. It is the voice, the compulsion, the power of matter that is speaks out here, a speaking-out that is absolutely continuous with Worringer's writing, and with our reading of it. Ultimately Worringer's creates a trap for conceptual *and* historical thinking, a *mise-en-abîme* from which, as we already saw in the Introduction, we can find no point of entry or point of departure: "Wir finden keinen Punkt, wo wir einsetzen, keinen Punkt wo wir haltmachen könnten. Jeder Punkt ist innerhalb dieser unendlichen Bewegtheit gleichwertig, und alle zusammen sind sie gegenüber der durch sie reproduzierten Bewegtheit wertlos" (37) ["We find no point of entrance, no point of rest. Every point in this endless movement is of equal value and all of them combined are without value compared with the agitation they produce" (56)]. We are dealing with a line that is not composed of any points (a contradiction that anticipates what Deleuze, *via* Artaud, will call the body without organs<sup>104</sup>). This is the inverted image of the part that usurps the whole, namely, a whole with no parts. But this inversion is just another version of

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<sup>104</sup> See Joseph Vogl, "Anorganismus: Worringer und Deleuze" in *Wilhelm Worringers Kunstgeschichte*. Ed. Hannes Böhringer, Beate Söntgen. München: Wilhelm Fink, 2002, p. 188.



the delirious movement out of the furrows that ceaselessly reforms itself into a movement that returns to the furrows, that converts and reconverts the inside and the outside in a single gesture that is both a visual line in space and a written/read line of text. Whether the part usurps the whole or the whole has no parts, whether expression is contained by or explodes its matter and its form: none of this is as relevant as the *unity* of all these alternatives as a constant variation which, in looking at it or producing it, writing (about) it or reading it, leads to delirium.

In Chapter 3 we will see how the unstoppable variation of inside and outside, of part and whole, of visual and written, and literal and metaphorical leads to the delirium of the protagonist of Rilke's *Aufzeichnungen*.

## CHAPTER 3

### WRITING VERSUS VERSES: DELIRIOUS WRITING IN RILKE'S

#### *AUFZEICHNUNGEN*

Aut homo insanit, aut versus facit.

[The man's delirious – or composing poetry !]

—Horace, Satires II, 7

(trans. Niall Rudd, Penguin Press, 1973)

In this chapter, I argue that Rilke's use of metaphorical language both protects him from and exposes him to a delirious experience of the outside of language. As I mention in Chapter 1, metaphor for Rilke must always be understood as a filter or screen protecting language—and its speakers, writers and readers—from its fundamental ungroundedness and otherness regarding things as they are. In reading Rilke's work, we face the paradox that the more closely he formulates and performs the structuring, sheltering function of metaphor, the more he risks collapsing the entire structure around him and exposing himself to the chaos of things, life, reality *as such*, an experience of delirium suffered at the limit of what poetic language makes possible. In the *Aufzeichnungen*, the protagonist Malte is perhaps farthest from the *Weltinnenraum* of Rilke's later work than any other figure or voice in Rilke's work.<sup>105</sup> Here I trace that exposure of Rilke's protagonist by placing the *Aufzeichnungen* in the context of Rilke's earlier engagements with the visual arts. Malte fails to attain in poetry the same painterly ideals that Rilke saw in the Worpswede artists and in Cézanne, yet I argue that his writing is of singular importance for Rilke's later work and for the understanding of delirium as a decisive stylistic and discursive problem that traverses the art history, aesthetic theory, poetry and prose of the period in

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<sup>105</sup> The paradigmatic explication of *Weltinnenraum* as transcendental spatial and temporal figuration in Rilke's poetry is Beda Allemann's study, *Zeit und Figur beim späten Rilke*, especially pp. 13-24.

question.

In Part I, I read Rilke's monograph on landscape painting, *Worpswede* (1903) as both precursor and antithesis to the *Aufzeichnungen*. I argue that Rilke's reflections on landscape painting function implicitly as the aesthetic ideal that the protagonist Malte fails to attain. The visual arts (*via* landscape painting) do not so much lay the groundwork for understanding Rilke's *Aufzeichnungen* as impose an impossible artistic task that Rilke simultaneously embraces and disavows. That task could be summarized as follows: all of the arts are sustained by the inherent productivity and meaningfulness of comparing incommensurabilities; oppositions like inside/outside, self/world, human/nature, proximity/distance, fullness/vastness are, in principle, open to an artistic resolution that would unify disparate terms through comparison or substitution, in a word, through metaphor. In the *Aufzeichnungen*, however, the productive energy that an artist *should* be able to use in order to unify opposed spheres and overcome contradictions of every kind is somehow out of reach or out of control. The artist cannot unify oppositions, but only drown in excesses of either/or, e.g. a bottomless, broken interiority or else a crushing, overwhelming exteriority, with no balancing, mediating movement in between. Through the contrast between these two texts, we can see how Malte tries to apply the same metaphorical principle of art as would the idealized artist of the *Worpswede* monograph, only now that metaphorical bridging of opposites is revealed to be exactly that: just a metaphor that cannot resolve the reality of Malte's urban experience in a stable poetic form. The metaphorical power of art is reduced; his would-be poetry becomes merely writing, cut off from the chain of metaphors and substitutions that would weave his words into a vast, harmonious interchange. In the *Aufzeichnungen*, that metaphorical chain is broken, and the mere writing, or writing-down, traces instead the unstable contours of the

figure of delirium.<sup>106</sup>

In Part II, I describe how this figure functions in the *Aufzeichnungen*, both in terms of what it makes possible and impossible. Evoking a primal metaphor of writing (as writing in furrows) and a primal metaphor of madness (as straying from the furrows),<sup>107</sup> I show how the figure of delirium develops a stylistic and conceptual oscillation. Oppositions do not generate a structuring, balancing principle (as they do in the *Worpswede* monograph); rather it is the oscillation between terms that creates the *style* of the text, the unfurrowed line of writing and madness, without inside or outside, content or form, fantasy or reality. The delirious line of Malte's writing is, to a certain extent, liberating as a possibility or gesture insofar as it frees the artist from the totalizing harmonization of oppositions and serves as a buffer against the horror and alienation of urban life, a short-term refuge from the refuse, as it were. But the buffering or protecting effect of delirious writing is transitory at best, and I show how the style of the text turns itself inside out, exposing the interiority of the writer (both figuratively and literally). Unlike in the *Worpswede* text, the *Aufzeichnungen* refuse to resolve the contradictions of perception and artistic expression through metaphor: rather Malte must learn to see every object and to experience every state of mind *as such*, not as a pretext for a pre-given metaphorical resolution.

In Part III, I describe Malte's efforts to learn to see (and to write down) reality as such in terms of the various delirious figures that this reality belatedly assumes in his writing (e.g., "das Versäumte," "das zähe Leben" and "das Große"). I conclude in Part IV by showing how this delirious writing can and cannot be assimilated to Rilke's later work.

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<sup>106</sup> To the best of my knowledge, none of the vast critical literature on the *Aufzeichnungen* has explicitly emphasized the disjunction between the aesthetics of the *Worpswede*-ian landscape and the poetics of Malte's urban crisis.

<sup>107</sup> See Introduction.

## Part I: *Worpswede* and the Art of Metaphor

Rilke's monograph *Worpswede*, written during his stay at the art colony in 1901-1902, focuses on five of the colony's resident painters (Fritz Mackensen, Otto Modersohn, Fritz Overbeck, Hans am Ende and Heinrich Vogeler). In his hushed and reverential description of these painters' work (and, through them, of the figure of the artist in general), Rilke unfolds a sustained reflection of the artist's relation to nature: in a word, nature is that which is most radically other to humans, and the artist (whose qualities are loneliness, uniqueness and inwardness) is the sort of human who, precisely because of that radical alterity, can use nature as the means of expression of his most unique essence or personality. The history of art is the history of the human's increasing proximity to nature and of the individual artist's ability both to come closer to nature (as that which is most foreign to him) and to recede from it and see himself mirrored in its image. Individual works of art depict this process as a riddle in which self and image, inner content and outer form, stand in a constantly revealing-concealing balance with one another.

Rilke's introduction to the monograph suggests that the history of landscape painting is the history of the human's relation to nature as such. The point of departure is an impassive, threatening otherness that fills the human with an almost

Worringerian dread and agoraphobia:

Wer [. . .] die Geschichte der Landschaft zu schreiben hätte, befände sich zunächst hilflos preisgegeben dem Fremden, dem Unverwandten, dem Unfassbaren. [. . .] Wir pflegen, bei dem Menschen, vieles aus ihren Händen zu schließen und alles aus ihrem Gesicht, in welchem, wie auf einem Zifferblatt, die Stunden sichtbar sind, die ihre Seele tragen und wiegen. Die Landschaft aber steht ohne Hände da und hat kein Gesicht, – oder aber sie ist ganz Gesicht und wirkt durch die Größe und Unübersehbarkeit ihrer Züge furchtbar und niederdrückend auf den Menschen [. . .]. (5: 10)

Landscape is illegible to the human; it has no hands and is thus incapable of gesture,

of intended action (*Willensakte*) and, in a strange reversal, the fact that nature has no hands means that *we* cannot grasp it. Rilke later writes dismissively of human

“Verkehr” with nature, of its human-scaled nominalism:

Aber immer und immer wieder in Jahrtausenden schütteln die Kräfte  
[der Natur] ihre Namen ab und erheben sich, wie ein underdrückter  
Stand gegen ihre kleinen Herren, ja nicht einmal *gegen* sie, – sie stehen  
einfach auf, und die Kulturen fallen von den Schultern der Erde, die  
wieder groß ist und weit und allein mit ihren Meeren, Bäumen und  
Sternen. (5: 12)

Technical proximity to nature is, for Rilke, one-sided: man works on nature and assigns names to it, but nature does not give anything of itself back. It remains, to use two adjectives that recur again and again in this text, *teilnahmslos* and *gleichgültig*.

Precisely in “knowing” nature in a technico-nominal way lies the human’s total ignorance of nature. And in failing to see the radical alterity of nature as that which is most foreign, unrelated and incomprehensible, technical man fails to see the *specular* quality of nature as well, hence failing to see himself. For as we have just read, Rilke claims that nature either has no face, or is *all* face (*Gesicht*, which also means “vision”); extreme lack and plenitude of face/vision amount to the same thing: a surface onto which human qualities can be projected or recognized, an unknown and unknowable object of sensation which paradoxically becomes the very means of human self-knowledge and its expression.

The process toward that knowledge and expression is, for Rilke, the task of the artist, a regression and conscious naiveté in which the artist learns to see as if he were a child again, thereby being able to connect himself to nature through artistic work, rather than merely working on nature in an alienated, technical way.

Der gewöhnliche Mensch, der mit den Menschen lebt und die Natur nur  
so weit sieht, als sie sich auf ihn bezieht, wird dieses rätselhaften und  
unheimlichen Verhältnisses selten gewahr. Er sieht die Oberfläche der  
Dinge, die er und seinesgleichen seit Jahrhunderten geschaffen haben,  
und glaubt gerne, die ganze Erde nehme an ihm Teil, weil man ein Feld  
bebauen, einen Wald lichten und einen Fluß schiffbar machen kann.

Sein Auge, welches fast nur auf Menschen eingestellt ist, sieht die Natur nebenbei mit, als ein Selbstverständliches und Vorhandenes, das soviel als möglich ausgenutzt werden muß. Anders schon sehen Kinder die Natur [. . .]. (5: 13)

The typical human's only relation to nature is one of blindly instrumental rationality. Nature is self-evident, ready-to-hand, raw material. But for Rilke, self-evidence is a learned obliviousness, the result of a certain falling-away from nature that comes with growing up. As Rilke suggests above, children already see the world differently, living in nature "ähnlich den kleinen Tieren, ganz hingegeben an die Ereignisse des Waldes und des Himmels und in einem unschuldigen, scheinbaren Einklang mit ihnen" (5: 13). The onset of puberty throws this apparent harmony out of tune, initiating a slow and difficult process in which growing up amounts to growing away from nature.<sup>108</sup>

Artists are those who, at the end of the process of maturation and alienation from nature, try to return to it and restore that lost harmony, those who:

[der Natur] nachgehen und nun versuchen, bewußt und mit Aufwendung eines gesammelten Willens, ihr wieder so nahe zu kommen wie sie ihr, ohne es recht zu wissen, in der Kindheit waren. Man begreift, daß diese Letzteren Künstler sind: Dichter oder Maler, Tondichter oder Baumeister, Einsame im Grunde, die, indem sie sich der Natur zuwenden, das Ewige dem Vergänglichen, das im Tiefsten Gesetzmäßige dem vorübergehend Begründeten vorziehen, und die, da sie die Natur nicht überreden können, an ihnen teilnehmen, ihre Aufgabe darin sehen, die Natur zu erfassen, um sich selbst irgendwo in ihre großen Zusammenhänge einzufügen. (5: 14)

Nature remains in essence impassive, contingent, other, but the artist is the one who tries to fit himself precisely into the context or background that refuses him. What is crucial in this artistic theory is that the artist's restoration of his relation to nature is a fiction, a fantasy, the disavowal and dangerous truth of a metaphysics of art. Rilke writes that art "das *Medium* ist, in welchem Mensch und Landschaft, Gestalt und Welt

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<sup>108</sup> On the bioexistential discord of puberty, see Worringer's *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, in which the turbulent condition of the Gothic *Kunstwollen* is equated to the puberty of (European) humanity as whole. "War nicht die Gotik mit ihrer kranken Differenziertheit, mit ihren Extremen und mit ihrer Unruhe die Pubertätszeit des europäischen Menschen?" (158) [Was not Gothic, with its morbid differentiation, with its extremes and with its unrest, the age of puberty of European man?" (115)].

sich begegnen und finden“ (15 emphasis added), but the mediality of that encounter is *never* to be overcome. For he continues:

In Wirklichkeit leben sie [d.h., die Menschheit und die Natur] nebeneinander, kaum von einander wissend, und im Bilde, im Bauwerk, in der Symphonie, mit einem Worte in der Kunst, *scheinen* sie sich, *wie* in einer höheren prophetischen Wahrheit, zusammenzuschließen, aufeinander zu berufen, und *es ist, als ergänzten* sie einander zu jener vollkommenen Einheit, die das Wesen des Kunstwerkes ausmacht. (5: 15 emphasis added JD)

Humanity and nature *seem* to join themselves *as if* in a higher prophetic truth, *as if* they were supplementing each other toward the perfect unity of the artwork. But as lofty as Rilke's language is on this point, one cannot overlook the hypothetical, fictional, imaginary quality of what he says: art is not the joining of man and nature, but the *image* of that joining, the metaphorical union of the two spheres which, in reality, *in Wirklichkeit*, remain forever separate.<sup>109</sup> Metaphor (as simile, substitution, comparison) becomes the ideal end of art. In the examples Rilke proceeds to enumerate, the face is like a landscape, the roaring of the symphony is like the rushing of the blood, the building is like the forest. But reality as such, nature as such, even the work of art as such remain forever hidden under a veil of metaphors that renders them intelligible and unknowable at the same time.<sup>110</sup>

The most powerful feature of Rilke's theory of art in the *Worpswede* monograph is the harmonious interchangeability and generativity of the metaphorical relation itself. In art, the human is like nature, nature is like the human, and moreover,

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<sup>109</sup> I emphasize the same point through my reading of the last line of Rilke's "Der Lesende" in Chapter 1.

<sup>110</sup> Although Paul de Man reads only Rilke's poetry in his discussion of Rilke in *Allegories of Reading*, he identifies precisely the same functioning of metaphor, of figural language: all of the images in the poetry, he argues, are subservient to the power of metaphor itself, which they ultimately depict. Rilke's poetry as a whole depends, in varying degrees of explicitness, upon a pre-established totality of figural language which gradually strips its objects of their referentiality, their reality. The paradox of Rilke's language (and, indeed, of all literary language, according to de Man) is that it forfeits its claim to the truth and understanding of the extra-textual, referential world precisely when it attains the total formal self-mastery that allows it to make such a claim. It is a version of this paradox that, I argue, also remains hidden in *Worpswede* and comes to the surface in the *Aufzeichnungen*.



the human and nature are like that very likeness. The metaphor (the “wie,” the “als ob,” the “scheinbar”) is the A and the B and the “=” of the equation A = B. The poetic relation “man is like nature” (and all its reversals and permutations) is totalizing and complete. The following citation shows the full extent of this similitive view of art in which every entity is understood as something else, but never as itself:

Und ein Bildnis machen, heißt das nicht, einen Menschen wie eine Landschaft sehen, und giebt es eine Landschaft ohne Figuren, welche nicht ganz erfüllt ist davon, von dem zu erzählen, der sie gesehen hat? Wunderliche Beziehungen ergeben sich da. Manchmal sind sie in reichem, fruchtbaren Kontrast nebeneinandergesetzt, manchmal scheint der Mensch aus der Landschaft, ein andres Mal die Landschaft aus dem Menschen hervorzugehen, und dann wieder haben sie sich ebenbürtig und geschwisterlich vertragen. Die Natur scheint sich für Augenblicke zu nähern, indem die sogar den Städten einen Schein von Landschaft giebt, und mit Centauren, Seefrauen und Meergreisen aus Böcklinischem Blute nähert sich die Menschheit der Natur: immer aber kommt es auf dieses Verhältnis an, nicht zuletzt in der Dichtung, die gerade dann am meisten von der Seele zu sagen weiß, wenn sie Landschaft giebt, und die verzweifeln müßte, das Tiefste von ihm zu sagen, stünde der Mensch in jenem uferlosen und leeren Raume, in welchen ihn Goya gerne versetzt hat. (5: 15-6)

The most marvelous relations yield themselves at the point where a face becomes a landscape, or a landscape gains the same expressivity as a human face. The contact between these two radical opposites, the human figure and the landscape, is either a rich and fruitful one, or is altogether dissolved in their *seeming* proximity. The relation itself is so powerful as to make even a city look like a landscape, or to fuse human figures with the natural world, as in the reference to Böcklin. But in spite of himself, Rilke gestures toward the undoing of the fullness of his vision of art, of its chain of meaningfulness, when he mentions poetry. Although nearly all of Rilke’s examples in the text focus on visual and plastic arts, poetry must also have its place along this of chain of metaphorical relations. Poetry knows how to say the most of this relation because, presumably, its essence consists of nothing but metaphors. It can say the most about the human soul, but it also know the deepest despair because, as the artistic

model of the monograph implies, there is no immediacy it can hide behind. In the model of poetry that emerges in *Worpswede*, there is no concrete seeing or hearing, concrete in the sense that the work and the observer grow together in a shared physical presence. Poetry cannot attain this co-presence, hence its metaphors are the purest, but also the emptiest. Poetic art would not be the joining of two opposed spheres (self/work, man/nature, inner world/ outer expression), but rather the metaphorical disavowal of their incommensurability that is both closest and farthest from the essence of all the arts.

In *Worpswede* we see how the artist transforms nature from something frightful into something fruitful (to use Rilke's own words, the *furchtbar* is transformed into the *fruchtbar*). That transformation constitutes the metaphor (as simile, comparison, substitution) that lies at the essence of art. Rilke thus describes art in metaphors and *as* a metaphor, the joining of two opposed spheres (human/nature; landscape/expression; inside/outside) through their translation: seeing, perceiving or making one *like* the other, *as if it were* the other. I have suggested that this artistic joining or merging of oppositions through metaphor depends on the disavowal of its impossibility, that the unifying power of art is a kind of fantasy or hypothesis that Rilke needs without perhaps entirely being aware of it. Larson Powell has argued that Rilke's poetry from the Worpswede period and into the years of the *Neue Gedichte* is characterized by an unconscious supplementation of the illusory plenitude of nature through poetic figuration.<sup>111</sup> I would suggest that one need not necessarily resort to the vocabulary of psychoanalysis to understand this structure of disavowal. Even a classic study like Beda Allemann's *Zeit und Figur beim späten Rilke* (1961) contains the

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<sup>111</sup> See the chapter "Rilke's Unnatural Things: From the End of Landscape to the *Dinggedicht*," which makes an explicitly psychoanalytic use of disavowal (*Verleugnung*) to account for Rilke's subsequent poetic strategy of transforming Worpswedian nature into a Thing (in the particular psychoanalytic sense of the term) in *The Technological Unconscious in German Modernist Literature: Nature in Rilke, Benn, Brecht, and Döblin*. Rochester: Camden House, 2008. pp. 66-96.

conceptual and literary-analytical equipment for deducing the unknowing striving for a complete poetic/metaphoric figure that I describe here. Citing a famous line from the *Sonetten an Orpheus* (“Sei—und wisse zugleich des Nicht-Seins Bedingung,” II, 13), Allemann writes:

Das Wissen der Figur ist nicht möglich ohne das Wissen um des Nicht-Seins Bedingung, welche der imaginäre, transformierte, unsichtbare Raum ist. Das Wissen der Figur ist die Art und Weise wie das Unsichtbare in die sichtbare Gestalt, der Abschied in die Begegnung einbezogen wird. (292)

What in the “later” Rilke appears as the known figure, or the knowing of the figure, appears here at this “early” stage as the disavowal of a poetic (and existential) task that the poet has not yet carried to completion. This poetic metaphor defers and deflects the reality that the “gewusste Figur” will later transcend.

But as we turn now to the *Aufzeichnungen*, we see presently how fragile and tentative the *apparent* unities and harmonies of the Worpswedian metaphor are. And in the hardly accidental references (from the above citation) to the city, the mutated human body and the Goya-esque<sup>112</sup> void, we anticipate the delirium of the *Aufzeichnungen*. For it is precisely the monstrous images of the city, the body and the void that recur “as such” in this later text and show that the artistic process is not always generative of a totality of *wunderliche Beziehungen*, but rather of a fragmentation of self and world that, in the sheer proliferation and inassimilability of its objects, disfigures the very process that engenders it.

## Part II: Malte’s Delirium: from *Versäumen* to *Aufschreiben*

In the first pages of the *Aufzeichnungen* we encounter the same naïve artist of the *Worpswede* monograph, only now uprooted from the vast northern plain and left to wander the streets of an urban hell that threatens him with the deadly undoing of all

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<sup>112</sup> A reference either to Goya’s series of paintings dating from 1793-4 entitled “Fantasy and Invention” or to the late etchings entitled “The Disasters of War” (1810-15).

the patterns, relations and ideas that structured the life and art of the landscape. Instead of trees, clouds and people all charmed before the mysterious, but benevolent Mona-Lisa smile of nature, the artist now sees only hospitals, poor-houses, disembodied faces and hands (never entire people, only parts and impressions of people that cannot be subsumed to a whole); there is only stench, noise, sickness and death: a vast urban palimpsest of decay and abjection in which human beings, animals, abandoned buildings, garbage and pollution all mingle and rot indistinguishably in utter dilapidation. Even worse, this horror is not laid out on some vast, enigmatic plain where the potential for some kind of harmonious poetic distancing would still obtain, but rather on a map (“Ich suchte auf meinen Plan” 6: 709 [“I located it on my map” (3)]) that gives a precise name and location for every structure, an inexorable flat surface without destination or exit. Growth and becoming, the vital, driving forces of the naïve artist,<sup>113</sup> are replaced with death, but in a perversely active form of cancerous growth, the positive undoing of life. Death, in the example of Malte’s grandfather, makes demands, dwells, sits, and lays waste (6: 715-20); death grows in a person like the core of a fruit (6: 715); and even a pregnant woman, says Malte, gives birth to two fruits: a child and a death (6: 721). But the authentic Nordic death of Malte’s grandfather, as horrible and dreadful as it is, is no longer possible in the city-scape of turn-of-the-century Paris. The terrifying reversal of growth as growing death finds its most extreme expression in the anonymous, industrial death of the cities (“So, also hierher kommen die Leute, um zu leben, ich würde eher meinen, es stürbe sich hier” (6: 709) [This, then, is where people come to live; I’d have thought it more of a place to die” (3)]), death as a perverse function of a service economy: “Voilà votre mort, monsieur” (714); death as a industrial product of hospitals-turned-factories: “Jetzt

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<sup>113</sup> “Die Ebene ist das Gefühl, an welchem wir wachsen. [ . . . ] In einer solchen Ebene leben jene Maler, von denen zu reden sein wird. Ihr danken sie, was sie geworden sind und noch viel mehr: ihrer Unerschöpflichkeit und Größe danken sie, daß sie immer noch werden” (5: 26-7).

wird in 559 Betten gestorben. Natürlich fabrikmäßig” (6: 713) [Now they die in five hundred and fifty-nine [beds]. It is a factory production line, of course” (6)].

Immersed in such a cityscape, it is no surprise that Malte must first learn to see. In *Worpswede*, nature is a dictionary, and landscape is the language of all the arts. On this point, Rilke cites Delacroix, “La nature est pour nous un dictionnaire, nous y cherchons des mots” (5: 66); and he adds, “Der Künstler von heute empfängt von der Landschaft die Sprache für seine Geständnisse und nicht der Maler allein. Es ließe sich genau nachweisen, daß alle Künste jetzt aus dem Landschaftlichen leben“ (5: 68). To contemplate nature is already to see the words that will be used to describe it, and to describe the self, too, which is but nature’s mirror image. The artistic task lies in choosing the right combination of words that already lie in plain view. But in the *Aufzeichnungen* the problem of vision radically interposes itself between self and world at the outset of the artistic process. Seeing is no longer woven into a fabric of meaningful connection between outside and inside, but is rather a kind of garbage chute from the outside world that deposits “raw” visual impressions into some inner space, of which the poet knows very little:

Ich lerne sehen. Ich weiß nicht, woran es liegt, es geht alles tiefer in mich ein und bleibt nicht an der Stelle stehen, wo es sonst immer zu Ende war. Ich habe ein Inneres, von dem ich nicht wußte. Alles geht jetzt dorthin. Ich weiß nicht, was dort geschieht. (6: 710-1)

[I am learning to see. Why, I cannot say, but all things enter more deeply into me; nor do the impressions remain at the level where they used to cease. There is a place within me of which I knew nothing. Now all things tend that way. I do not know what happens there. (6)]

The inside has no relation to the outside, not even one of distance and strangeness (which were precisely the most productive of forces in *Worpswede*). Seeing is now a one-way street and the spectator’s “inside” is a blind end. As we will see, that new “inside” is also a source of fear. These two factors precipitate a reshuffling of the concept of artistic production, of poetics. The new task, Malte’s task, must answer the

question: how to write given the new mode of seeing and given the fear it generates or uncovers?

In the opening scenes of the text, Malte's thoughts quickly turn from his impressions of the city to writing verse. He describes in rich detail an *ars poetica* in which writing is organically linked to the writer's personal experience and inner development, indeed even to the writer's body; but there is an ironic or elegiac edge to the language, suggesting that he does not believe a word he's saying:

Man sollte warten [auf Versen] und Sinn und Süßigkeit sammeln ein ganzes Leben lang und ein langes womöglich, und dann, ganz zum Schluß, vielleicht könnte man dann zehn Zeilen schreiben, die gut sind. Denn Verse sind nicht, wie die Leute meinen, Gefühle (die hat man früh genug), – es sind Erfahrungen. [. . .] Und es genügt auch noch nicht, daß man Erinnerungen hat. Man muß sie vergessen können, wenn es viele sind, und man muß die große Geduld haben, zu warten, daß sie wiederkommen. Denn die Erinnerungen selbst *sind* es noch nicht. Erst wenn sie Blut werden in uns, Blick und Gebärde, namenlos und nicht mehr zu unterscheiden von uns selbst, erst dann kann es geschehen, daß in einer sehr seltenen Stunde das erste Wort eines Verses aufsteht in ihrer Mitte und aus ihnen ausgeht. (6: 724-5)

[One should wait, and gather meaning and sweetness a whole life long, a long life if possible, and then, at the very end, one might perhaps be able to write ten good lines. For verses are not feelings, as people imagine – those one has early enough; they are experiences. [. . .] And it is not yet enough to have memories. One has to be able to forget them, if there are a great many, and one must have great patience, to wait for their return. For it is not the memories in themselves that are of consequence. Only when they are become the very blood within us, our every look and gesture, nameless and no longer distinguishable from our inmost self, only then, in the rarest of hours, can the first word of a poem arise in their midst and go out from among them. (13-4)]

The organic model of artistic creation from *Worpswede* seems to be still intact:

language, body, and experience would stand in an interrelation, a unity of ceaseless dynamism and productivity, and the principal virtues of the artist would still be the patience and naïve trust needed to return to and re-express the clarity of that unity.

Abruptly at the beginning of the next paragraph, however, Malte writes, “Alle meine

Verse aber sind anders entstanden, also sind es keine. –” (725) [All of my poems, however, originated in a different manner, and so they are not poems. –” (14)]. This line crystallizes the irony of the preceding passage into a new and difficult thought: the artist now stands *outside* the creative process, not simply distanced, but radically divided from it. And not only is the poet cut off from the ability to write verse, but that inability also amounts to a deprivation of memory, experience and even the body itself. If writing verse requires the incorporation (literal or metaphorical) of experience, memory and feeling into the texture and action of the body (followed by the re-transformation of body into word), then the poet who cannot write such a verse can lay no claim to his past, his emotions, or his very body.<sup>114</sup> It is the problem of being placed outside oneself, *exposed* (the German word “ausgesetzt” has a particular resonance), that Malte must now devote “his” energies.

In this loss of self there lies also a kind of possibility, at least initially, and the failure of one poetic model, in turn, makes possible a new kind of writing.

Immediately following this reflection on his literary failure, Malte writes:

Es ist lächerlich. Ich sitze hier in meiner kleinen Stube, ich, Brigge, der achtundzwanzig Jahre alt geworden ist und von dem niemand weiß. Ich sitze hier und bin nichts. Und dennoch, dieses Nichts fängt an zu denken und denkt, fünf Treppen hoch, an einem grauen Pariser Nachmittag diesen Gedanken. (6: 726)

[It is ridiculous. Here I sit in my little room, I, Brigge, twenty-eight years old now and known to no one. Here I sit, and I am nothing. And yet, this nothing begins to think, and five flights up, on a grey Paris afternoon, thinks this: (14)]

The loss of self here becomes a kind of absurd joke, suggested by the precise spatial and temporal coordinates of the 28-year old “nothing” that, according to some twisted

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<sup>114</sup> On the significance of incorporation for Rilke’s poetics, see Anette Schwarz’s “The Colors of Prose: Rilke’s Program of *Sachliches Sagen*.” *The Germanic Review*; Summer 1996, 71, 3: 195-210. Schwarz shows how Rilke’s visually-inflected poetics of “sachliches Sagen” (derived not from his experience at Worspwede, but from his letters on Cézanne, which I discuss below) depends on a failed metaphoric of incorporation whereby, in Malte’s case, the body does not produce art out of what it interiorizes, but is rather contaminated by those interiorizations which compulsively burst forth as verbal waste.

Cartesian logic (*nihil sum, ergo cogito*) begins to think. And his thoughts take the form of a series of questions<sup>115</sup> that pose the possibility of a radical misunderstanding of the entirety of human life and history.

Ist es möglich, denkt es [d.h., dieses Nichts], daß man noch nichts Wirkliches und Wichtiges gesehen, erkannt und gesagt hat? Ist es möglich, daß man Jahrtausende Zeit habt hat, zu schauen, nachzudenken und aufzuzeichnen, und daß man die Jahrtausende hat vergehen lassen wie eine Schulpause, in der man sein Butterbrot ißt und einen Apfel?

Ja, es ist möglich. [. . .]

Ist es möglich, daß die ganze Weltgeschichte mißverstanden worden ist? [. . .]

Ist es möglich, daß all diese Menschen eine Vergangenheit, die nie gewesen ist, ganz genau kennen? Ist es möglich, dass alle Wirklichkeiten nichts sind für sie; daß ihr Leben abläuft, mit nichts verknüpft, wie eine Uhr in einem leeren Zimmer –? (6: 726-7).

[Is it possible, it thinks, that we have neither seen nor perceived nor said anything real or of any importance yet? Is it possible that we have had thousands of years to look, ponder and record, and that we have let those thousands of years pass like a break at school, when one eats a sandwich and an apple?

Yes it is possible. [. . .]

Is it possible that the entire history of the world has been misunderstood? [. . .]

Is it possible that all these people have an exact knowledge of a past that never happened? Is it possible that all realities are nothing to them; that their life is winding down, connected to nothing at all, like a clock in an empty room –? (15-6)]

Malte imagines a humanity as trivial, absurd and careless as he, and that image is a perverse consolation to him. If he has been divided from his own body and past, and if the rest of humanity, equally deprived, has neglected or failed to perceive what is most important, then *someone* must begin to make reparations, to set things right. Precisely because the task is so immense, vague and ultimately impossible, it might just as well be undertaken by a 28-year old Danish nothing, sitting in a 6<sup>th</sup> floor room on a gray

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<sup>115</sup> See the discussion of these so-called “große Fragen” in Manfred Engel’s afterword to the Reclam edition, p. 332.



afternoon in Paris.

Der Nächstbeste, der, welcher diesen beunruhigenden Gedanken gehabt hat, muß anfangen etwas von dem Versäumten zu tun; wenn es auch nur irgend einer ist, durchaus nicht der Geeignetste: es ist eben kein anderer da. Dieser junge, belanglose Ausländer, Brigge, wird sich fünf Treppen hoch hinsetzen müssen und schreiben, Tag und Nacht: ja er wird schreiben müssen, das wird das Ende sein. (6: 728)

[Anyone – anyone who has had these disquieting thoughts – must make a start on some of the things that we have omitted to do; anyone at all, no matter if he is not the aptest to the task: the fact is, there is no one else. This young foreigner of no consequence, Brigge, will have to sit himself down, five flights up, and write, day and night: yes, that is what it will come to – he will have to write. (16-7)]

Malte is obsessed with “das Versäumte,” with all that has been omitted, neglected, missed, failed. But as someone who finally perceives that neglect, who is learning to see what everyone else has ignored or overlooked, he is entitled to write about it. He may not be the most qualified or appropriate person (der Geeignetste) for the task, but he is the only one there to do it, and so he must (“ja er wird schreiben *müssen*” emphasis added JD).

Malte wants to make amends for *das Versäumte*, to redress all the failures, omissions and lapses of human experience. However, as we have seen, he cannot sustain a coherent poetic project and does not have a strategy for aesthetic redemption. But if he cannot restore and redeem what has been thrown away, he can at least record it, hence his compulsion to write, to the writing-down that becomes the terrible accumulation in word and feeling of what has been cast out in reality. As the *Aufzeichnungen* accumulate, Malte’s body becomes a kind of storage facility for the wasted life of the city (not a landscape, but a landfill), and it is only a matter of time before the contaminants burst forth. The writing that should protect him from the refuse of the human world becomes the very danger of a terrible proximity that should have remained at a safe distance. For example, what Malte finds most disturbing about

the outcast (*die Fortgeworfenen*) of Paris is not their abject poverty (although he describes them with such vehemence as if to exorcise them from his consciousness<sup>116</sup>), but the fact that he *belongs* to them: “Die sehen mich an und wissen es. Die wissen, daß ich eigentlich zu ihnen gehöre [. . .]” (6: 742) [“They give me one look and they know. They know that really I am one of them [. . .]” (26)]. What most terrifies Malte in the image of a demolished apartment building, with only one internal wall left standing, is not the uncanny, non-organic “life” of the building’s skeleton<sup>117</sup>, but rather that mere fact that he *recognizes* it:.

[A]ber ich will einen Eid geben dafür, daß ich zu laufen begann, sobald ich die Mauer erkannt hatte. Denn das ist das Schreckliche, daß ich sie erkannt habe. Ich erkenne das alles hier, und darum geht es so ohne weiteres in mich ein: es ist zu Hause in mir. (6: 751)

[I swear I broke into a run the moment I recognized that wall. For that is the terrible thing: I recognized it. I recognize everything here, and that is why it enters into me so readily: it is at home in me. (31)]

Just as the outcast seem to be giving subtle signs that only he can recognize, the

<sup>116</sup>“Denn das ist mir klar, daß das die Fortgeworfenen sind, nicht nur Bettler; nein, es sind eigentlich keine Bettler, man muß Unterschiede machen. Es sind Abfälle, Schalen von Menschen, die das Schicksal ausgespien hat. Feucht vom Speichel des Schicksals kleben sie an einer Mauer, an einer Laterne, an einer Plakatsäule, oder sie rinnen langsam die Gasse herunter mit einer dunklen, schmutzigen Spur hinter sich her.” (6: 743) [“For it is clear to me that untouchables is what they are, not mere beggars; no, they really are not beggars, one must make distinctions. They are human refuse, the husks of men, spat out by fate, they cling to a wall, a lamp-post, a Morris column, or they dribble slowly down the street, leaving a dark, dirty trail behind them.” (26)]

<sup>117</sup> This is what he calls “das zähe Leben dieser Zimmer,” and it reminds one of the etymology of “leben” as slime, sludge, residue, related to the verbs “bleiben” and “kleben,” the latter of which Malte uses both in his description of the outcast and of this exposed apartment wall. The description is full of grotesque detail, intensely visual, and at the same time unvisualizable. What Malte *sees* is stench, he sees a history of malodorous, rotten, reeking residues of human excreta and cooking fumes and cigarette smoke as they still cling to the exposed wall: “das zähe Leben dieser Zimmer” (6: 750) The image is a sustained synaesthesia, the impossible seeing of a smell, a substitution of a concrete, synchronous image for a diachronous history of odors and fumes and stench that is so powerfully present as to be a hallucination. There is a sense of disgust at the life of these dilapidated objects, but, at the same time, as his passage on the leper from *Briefe an Cézanne* suggests, an urgency or necessity to record what no one else can or wants to see. The idea of “das zähe Leben” reappears (in the entry “Die Existenz des Entsetzlichen...”) as “zähe Unvergänglichkeit” (6: 776). It is a distillate or residue of human suffering and fear. “Die Menschen möchten vieles davon vergessen dürren; ihr Schlaf feilt sanft über solche Furchen im Gehirn, aber Träume drängen ihn ab und ziehen die Zeichnungen nach” (776) [“People would prefer to be able to forget much of it; sleep files away gently at the grooves in the brain, but dreams drive it away and chase the lines anew” (48)]. These metaphorical furrows in the brain are discussed further in Chapter 4.

demolished building offers an image of life-as-residue that only he can perceive. The confidence of the lone 28-year-old nothing to rewrite all of human history very quickly becomes a paranoid hallucination. It is no accident that as he runs away from the exposed building, Malte is pursued by a double and overcome by agoraphobia and hallucinations of bodily eruption (the famous scene at the *crémérie*). However, just as the panic becomes overwhelming, a new paragraph tries to impose some distance. Malte switches to the present tense and describes his desk, his chair, the cheap oven and coal that spoil the air in his room. But his thoughts move inexorably back to the scene of panic: the *crémérie* where he sees a passing stranger, a *Doppelgänger* whose face mirrors Malte's inner collapse:

Ja, er wußte, daß er sich jetzt von allem entfernte: nicht nur von den Menschen. Ein Augenblick noch, und alles wird seinen Sinn verloren haben, und dieser Tisch und die Tasse und der Stuhl, an den er sich klammert, alles Tägliche und Nächste wird unverständlich geworden sein, fremd und schwer. So saß er da und wartete, bis es geschehen sein würde. Und wehrte sich nicht mehr. (6: 755)

[Yes, he knew he was now making his withdrawal from everything: not only from humankind. One moment more and all of it would have lost its meaning, and this table and the cup and the chair he clung hold of, all the everyday things, the familiar things, would have become incomprehensible, strange to him, and difficult. And so he sat, waiting for it to have happened, no longer offering any resistance. (33-4)]

The fact that Malte can sit in his room, thinking and writing, does not provide any sheltering distance or shape to his experience. In fact, distance and unrecognizability now emerge as precisely what are most terrifying in his experiences: “[D]och habe ich jenen Mann nur begreifen können, weil auch in mir etwas vor sich geht, das anfängt, mich von allem zu entfernen und abzutrennen. Wie graute mir immer, wenn ich von einem Sterbenden sagen hörte: er konnte schon niemanden mehr erkennen” (6: 755)

[And yet I was only able to understand that man because something is happening within me as well, something that is starting to withdraw me and part me from

everything. How horrified I always used to be when people said that somebody dying could no longer recognize anyone” (34)]. The paradox of Malte’s condition of self-exposure is that the total recognition of inner self in the outer world and the total *lack of recognition* of inner self in the outer world amount to the same delirious state. His fear turns itself inside out, shuttling back and forth between these two terrible alternatives that are nevertheless fundamentally the same condition of self-exposure, in which the ex-posure of the self (as vulnerability, homelessness, fragmentation, solitude) is just as alienating as the recognition of the self in all the broken-down people and broken-down buildings. To be “exposed” as one of the outcast, to be outted and claimed by the outcast, is as devastating an experience of non-belonging as the disinheritance and destitution of a friendless foreigner alone in the metropolis.<sup>118</sup>

Malte wants to reclaim the refuse of human experience, including his own. Likewise, he wants to do something against the fear that he experiences, but cannot yet transform into verse. Although poetry has become impossible, Malte can still simply write: “Ich habe etwas getan gegen die Furcht. Ich habe die ganze Nacht gesessen und geschrieben [. . .]” (6: 721) [“I have been doing something to ward off fear. I have sat up all night writing [. . .]” (11)]. If he cannot restore and redeem what has been thrown away, cannot incorporate and transform his experience into verse, he can at least record the vast entropy and debris of the city and his life, hence his compulsion to write, to the writing-down that threatens to become the delirious accumulation in word and feeling of what has been exposed and outcast in reality.<sup>119</sup> As Malte sits and thinks and writes, he moves back and forth between the

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<sup>118</sup> For an analysis of Malte’s exposure in existential terms that revises both Sokel’s notion of “Entichung” and Huyssen’s notion of the fragmented body, see chapter 6 of Patrick Greaney’s *Untimely Beggars: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin*. U. of Minnesota Press, 2008. Greaney argues that Rilke’s encounter with the outcast leads to a rejection of all forms of propriety and identity in literary language, but a rejection that is still open to a more fundamental, if undefined sense of community.

<sup>119</sup> See the Introduction for my discussion of writing-down (*Aufschreiben, Aufzeichnen*) in the context of Friedrich Kittler’s reading of Rilke (and Bennis) in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*.

present of his writing and the past of his experience. That back-and-forth movement (in German *auf und ab*) could be applied literally to Malte's writing as an oscillation between *aufschreiben* and *abschreiben*, each pole of writing intensifying itself to the point of its own undoing and reversal into its opposite. For example, the process of writing down also harbors a threat to the body and the self, the threat of *being* written:

Noch eine Weile kann ich das alles *aufschreiben* und sagen. Aber es wird ein Tag kommen, da meine Hand weit von mir sein wird, und wenn ich sie schreiben heißen werde, wird sie Worte schreiben, die ich nicht meine. Die Zeit der anderen Auslegung wird anbrechen, und es wird kein Wort auf dem anderen bleiben, und jeder Sinn wird wie Wolken sich auflösen und wie Wasser niedergehen. Bei aller Furcht bin ich schließlich doch wie einer, der vor etwas Großem steht, und ich erinnere mich, daß es früher oft ähnlich in mir war, eh ich zu schreiben begann. Aber diesmal wird ich geschrieben werden. Ich bin der Eindruck, der sich verwandeln wird. (6: 756, emphasis added JD)

[For some time yet, I shall still be able to write all of these things down or say them. But a day will come when my hand will be far away from me, and, when I command it to write, the words it writes will be ones I do not intend. The time of that other interpretation will come, and not one word will be left upon another, and all the meanings will dissolve like clouds and fall like rain. Though I am full of fear, I am yet like a man in the presence of greatness, and I recall that I often used to have this sensation within me before I began to write. But this time it is I who shall be written. I am the impression that will be transformed. (34-5)]

Writing-down is the constant deferral of the immediate present, the displacing of the daily strangeness, loneliness and ugliness of the city onto some future time when it will all have a meaning, a form, when it will belong to a writer who forms his experiences rather than just noting them down. But in this passage, the coming interpretation (*die neue Auslegung*) threatens Malte with the radical transformation of his self and his writing, which, although they have no unity or essence that could be subject to transformation in the first place, Malte clings to *as if* they had. The *neue Auslegung* exposes the meaning(lessness) of writing-down. We could think of it as the moment when Malte would actually sit down and read his notebooks, when he would

interrupt the *perpetuum mobile* of writing-down and pose the hitherto deferred question of what these writings mean, of what their unity or essence might be. But it is precisely the suppression or suspension of that question that constitutes his delirious writing in the first place. Should he come too close to it, he would have to turn back to other pole of the oscillation that structures his writing and thought, *Abschreiben*:

Ich habe immer noch geglaubt, es könnte eine Hülfe kommen. Da liegt es vor mir in meiner eigenen Schrift, was ich gebetet habe, Abend für Abend. Ich habe es mir aus den Büchern, in denen ich es fand, *abgeschrieben*, damit es mir ganz nahe wäre und aus meiner Hand entsprungenen wie Eigenes. Und ich will es jetzt noch einmal schreiben, hier vor meinem Tisch knieend will ich es schreiben; denn so habe ich es länger, als wenn ich es lese, und jedes Wort dauert und hat Zeit zu verhallen. (6: 756-7, emphasis added JD)

[I did still suppose that help might be to hand. There they are before me, in my own hand, the words I have prayed, every evening that came. I copied them from the books in which I found them, that they might be very near to me, issued from my hand as if they were my own. And I shall write them out once again now, kneeling here at my table I want to write them down; if I do this, I have them for longer than if I read them, and every word lasts and has time to die away. (35)]

*Abschreiben* is the transcription of other texts (in this case Malte copies out a prose-poem by Baudelaire and a passage from the book of Job), by which Malte tries to convince himself that “die Zeit der anderen Auslegung” has not yet come and that he still lives “unter den Bedeutungen [. . . die ihm] so lieb geworden sind” (6: 756) [“among the meanings [he] has grown so fond of” (34)]. The problem here is that the copied-out words have no meaning for Malte beyond the materiality of their transcription. During *Abschreiben* each word has time “zu verhallen,” to die away as a sound dies away, leaving no trace of its meaning behind. *Abschreiben* as a physical process supplants reading and excludes the possibility of the meaning of a literary text: in order to avoid reading a text and gathering a meaning out of the words on the page, Malte merely copies out texts word for word, as if that were the same as understanding them. Indeed, one theme developed later in the *Aufzeichnungen* is the reluctance, even

fear of reading.<sup>120</sup> There is thus similar logic of protection/exposure to *Abschreiben*, again in terms of the question of meaning, and Malte can only keep that overwhelming question at bay by circling back toward *Aufschreiben*.

### Part III: *Das Große*

Here we might return to Malte's theory of poetry as the literal/metaphorical incorporation of memory and experience and the retransformation of embodied experience into lines of verse: "Erst wenn sie [d.h., Erinnerungen] Blut werden in uns, Blick und Gebärde, namenlos und nicht mehr zu unterscheiden von uns selbst, erst dann kann es geschehen, daß in einer sehr seltenen Stunde das erste Wort eines Verses aufsteht in ihrer Mitte und aus ihnen ausgeht" (6: 725) ["Only when they are become the very blood within us, our every look and gesture, nameless and no longer distinguishable from our inmost self, only then, in the rarest of hours, can the first word of a poem arise in their midst and go out from among them" (14)]. When Malte decided he was incapable of such writing, he brought about—or fell victim to—a split between his inside and the outside world, a world which he could only learn to see (a pure perception that would remain untouched by subjectivity), but never transform into poetry. The lifting of the burden of writing poetry was initially also a kind of creative and indeed existential liberation for the poet. It allowed new possibilities of thinking and writing that made a place after all for Malte in the chaos of the city and

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<sup>120</sup> See the entry "Man tut gut, gewisse Dinge" in which Malte confesses that he has never been a proper reader. The reading of one single book conjures up for him the totality of all the world's unread books which bear down on Malte in an "aussichtsloser Überzahl" and compel him to read *all* books: "Was ich später so oft empfunden habe, das ahnte ich damals irgendwie voraus: daß man nicht das Recht hatte, ein Buch aufzuschlagen, wenn man sich nicht verpflichtete, alle zu lesen. Mit jeder Zeile brach man die Welt an. Vor den Büchern war sie heil und vielleicht wieder ganz dahinter." (6: 893) If each line of a book is a piece of the world, then all the unread books amount to a wasting or neglect of the world: "ich konnte nicht begreifen, wie man es über sich brachte, so viel Welt zu versäumen" (6: 894). The problem of reading as both the deferral of an impossible task and the immanent experience of that impossibility is contained in the word "versäumen" which implies the undone-ness of doing (i.e., for Malte, all that remains unwritten when one writes, all that remains unread when one reads).

of literary history. But as the gulf widened between a blind and broken inner self, and an outside that threatens to obliterate that “inner” self completely (and paradoxically so, because there’s nothing “in there” anyway) with its terrible significance, or its equally terrible meaninglessness and incomprehensibility, Malte’s writing traced this delirious path, moving back and forth between sets of contradictions and paradoxes that were constantly undoing, inverting and reforming themselves.<sup>121</sup> The scene at the Salpêtrière hospital is the site of the literalization of the metaphor of delirium. The accumulated impressions, these notations and jottings, the refuse of his own life and body, turn on him, return to him as a monstrous force of growing-death, *das Große*, the negativity of refuse and abjection given positive literal/metaphorical/hallucinatory/real form as a tumor that blinds and silences, swarms out of his body as Malte himself is pushed out of the furrows, the double metaphor of delirium (a form of madness and an unform of writing) having become an awful fact.

It is not entirely clear why Malte has been referred to the Salpêtrière hospital. Presumably he has seen a physician for panic or insomnia or any of the host of psychical and physical disturbances he has been enduring (and writing about) in the city. He writes, “Der Arzt hat mich nicht verstanden. Nichts. Es war ja auch schwer zu erzählen. Man wollte einen Versuch machen mit dem Elektisieren. Gut. Ich bekam einen Zettel: ich sollte um ein Uhr in der Salpêtrière sein. Ich war dort” (6: 758) [“The doctor did not understand me. Not a thing. True, it was difficult to describe. They

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<sup>121</sup> Ulrich Fülleborn has already described this formal aspect of Rilke’s text as a *Komplementaritätsgesetz*, “ein bebendes Gleichgewichtsspiel, ein dauerndes Umschlagen” that exceeds any of the particular polarities or oppositions that Malte grapples with at a given moment. See his “Form und Sinn der Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge: Rilkes Prosabuch und der moderne Roman” *Materialien zu Rainer Maria Rilke Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. Ed. Hartmut Engelhardt. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974. 175-98.

This balancing movement of Malte’s text has as its goal “das Denken mit einer Wirklichkeit zu konfrontieren, für die es keinerlei Denk- und Anschauungsformen a priori gibt – mit einer absolut nackten Wirklichkeit” (194). I understand the notion of an absolutely naked reality as a kind of analogy to the Foucauldian “experience of the outside” that can only be written down and read deliriously.



proposed to try electrotherapy. Very well. I was given a note of my appointment: one o'clock at the Salpêtrière. I was there" (36)]. His language here is uncharacteristically straightforward, the sentences brisk and to the point, yet somehow also dwelling on these details as if reluctant to say anything more. As if to foreshadow the literalization of delirious writing, Malte's movements through the hospital assume the same back-and-forth style of his writing. "Ich begann auf und ab zu gehen" (6: 758) ["I started to pace to and fro" (36)]. Rather than take his place in the waiting room with the other outcast, Malte paces up and down. Catching only glimpses at each turn (a woman's rotten gums, a bandaged and grotesquely swollen leg, etc), his constant motion keeps him from completely observing the horror around him. "Ich ging auf und ab und gab mir Mühe, ruhig zu sein" (6: 760) ["I paced to and fro and tried hard to stay calm" (37)]. An hour passes, but he hardly notices. "Ich sah nach der Uhr; ich war eine Stunde auf und ab gegangen. [. . . E]s verging wieder eine Stunde. Ich kann mich nicht erinnern, womit ich sie verbrachte. Sie verging" (6: 760) ["I checked the clock; I had been pacing to and fro for an hour. [. . . A]nother hour went by. I cannot remember how I passed it. It went by" (37)]. After being called to consult with the doctors, he returns to the horrible waiting room and to his pacing: "Ich kehrte also in meinem Gang zurück, in dem die Luft viel lastender geworden war, und fing wieder an, hin und her zu gehen, obwohl ich mich todmüde fühlte" (6: 761) ["So I returned to my passageway, where the air was now far more oppressive, and began to pace to and fro again, although I felt dead tired" (38)]. When a nurse yells at him for opening the door to let in fresh air, he decides yet again to resume pacing: "Ich beschloß, das Aufundabgehen wieder aufzunehmen, weil es schließlich eine Art Betäubung war und niemanden kränkte" (6: 762) ["I decided to go back to pacing to and fro, since it did have a calming effect, after all, and hurt no one" (38)]. As long as Malte can keep moving back and forth, he can keep the reality of the scene at bay. He moves back and

forth as if his entire body were a writing instrument, tracing furrows across the room, and by doing so, he tries to record the horror around him instead of actually seeing it (in the sense of “Ich lerne sehen”). When the nurse finally orders him to sit, he must give up “writing” and face the reality which he knew all along he could not avoid. Of his sitting down, he writes, “Ich betrachtete das alles mit Aufmerksamkeit, und es fiel mir ein, daß dies also der Platz sei, der für mich bestimmt gewesen war, denn ich glaubte nun endlich an diejenige Stelle meines Lebens gekommen zu sein, an der ich bleiben würde. Ja, das Schicksal geht wunderbare Wege” (6: 763) [“I observed all of this attentively, and it came to me that this must be the place I was destined for; this at last was the place in my life in which I would remain, or so I believed. Fate does indeed move in mysterious ways” (39)].

The back and forth movement of Malte’s pacing (and of his writing, of which the numerous references to pacing are a figuration) follows a trajectory that terminates in his own brain. Despite the impasse of inside/outside, of learning to see, the brain remains at least the physiological or literal “inside” of vision, and its metaphorical furrows represent both the inscription of external impressions on the surface of the brain and the writing-down of Malte’s *Aufzeichnungen*. And this brain, then, as the site of the impossible convergence of inside and outside, explodes. *Das Große*, the tumor that swells out of Malte’s body and wraps around his face, is the delirious, uncontrollable outgrowth of his own brain:

Jetzt war es da. Jetzt wuchs es aus mir heraus wie eine Geschwulst, wie ein zweiter Kopf, und war ein Teil von mir, obwohl es doch gar nicht zu mir gehören konnte, weil es so groß war. Es war da, wie ein großes totes Tier, das einmal, als es noch lebte, meine Hand gewesen war, oder mein Arm. Und mein Blut ging durch mich und durch es, wie durch einen und denselben Körper. Und mein Herz mußte sich sehr anstrengen, um das Blut in das Große zu treiben: es war fast nicht genug Blut da. Und das Blut trat ungern ein in das Große und kam krank und schlecht zurück. Aber das Große schwoll an und wuchs mir vor das Gesicht wie eine warme bläuliche Beule und wuchs mir vor dem Mund, und über meinem letzten Auge war schon der Schatten von

seinem Rande. (6: 765)

[Now it was there. Now it was growing from within me like a tumour, like a second head, and it was a part of me, though it surely could not be mine, since it was so big. There it was, like a big dead animal that had once been my hand when it was still alive, or my arm. And my blood was flowing through me, and through it, as if through one and the same body. And my heart was having to make a great effort to pump the blood into the big thing: there was very nearly not enough blood. And the blood was loth to pass in, and emerged sick and tainted. But the big thing swelled and grew before my face, like a warm, bluish boil, and grew before my mouth, and already its margins cast a shadow on my remaining eye. (40)]

The paradox of *das Große* is that it is both deeply a part of Malte, his own flesh and blood as it were, and yet at the same time could not possibly be a part of his body because it is also somehow larger than him, and a part should not exceed the size of the whole. *Das Große* is also a return, a surfacing of something that had been there once before and has perhaps been lurking all along. Although it is alive, growing or swelling out of Malte's body, it is at the same time dead ("wie ein großes totes Tier"), like a dead animal that once was Malte's arm or hand (turning the part of the human body that controls writing into a speechless animal). Nevertheless his blood circulates through this thing that both is and is not a part of him, dead and alive, animal and human. Just as language circulated in *Worpswede* as the connective element that joined all oppositions, yet maintained their integrity (a paradox that was necessarily also the disavowal of a paradox), so does Malte's blood circulate on either side of the oppositions self/other, life/death, human/animal, part/whole, only as the undeniable return of the disavowed paradox ("Jetzt war es wieder da"). The lack of Malte's blood to nourish *das Große* contrasts with the sheer excess of the big thing that is absorbing and polluting his blood, and though it seems to have exhausted Malte, drained him of everything it can take, it nevertheless continues to grow and grow. Its growth, having already killed his hand and arm, now covers his face, rendering him just like a

Worpswedian landscape in its real or true aspect (“Die Landschaft steht aber ohne Hände da und hat kein Gesicht, - oder aber sie ist ganz Gesicht und wirkt durch die Größe und Unübersehbarkeit ihrer Züge furchtbar und niederdrückend auf den Menschen” (5: 10). Rather than seeing his mirror image in the faceless landscape, Malte *becomes* the landscape itself through a figural defacement and dismemberment that transform him into the terrified human observer and the immense, faceless gaze of the landscape that crushes against him. It is the same opposition of man and nature from landscape painting, only the “fruchtbar” has become “furchtbar” again: the distancing vision of the landscape artist becomes the engulfing proximity of *das Große*, which cannot be seen or spoken of (since it blinds and silences as it defaces), but rather only felt by the body to which it is ultimately and paradoxically identical.

In an effort to escape, Malte turns the delusion of this figural delirium (i.e. his oscillations “auf und ab” in the waiting room) into a literal one by rushing out and running deliriously up and down the streets of Paris:

Ich kann mich nicht erinnern, wie ich durch die vielen Höfe hinausgekommen war. Es war Abend, und ich verirrte mich in der fremden Gegend und ging Boulevards mit endlosen Mauern in einer Richtung hinauf und, wenn dann kein Ende da war, in der entgegengesetzten Richtung zurück bis an irgendeinem Platz. Dort begann ich eine Straße zu gehen, und es kamen andere Straßen, die ich nie gesehen hatte, und wieder andere. Elektrische Bahnen rasten manchmal überhell und mit hartem, klopfendem Geläute heran und vorbei. Aber auf ihren Tafeln standen Namen, die ich nicht kannte. Ich wußte nicht, in welcher Stadt ich war und ob ich hier irgendwo eine Wohnung hatte und was ich tun mußte, um nicht mehr gehen zu müssen. (6: 765)

[I cannot remember how I made my way out through the many courtyards. Evening had fallen and, losing my way in a neighborhood that was unfamiliar to me, I walked up boulevards with never-ending walls and, having taken one direction and found there was no end to it, went back the opposite way till I came to some other square or other. Then I started down one street, and passed others I had never seen before, and still more. At times trams raced towards me and passed me, glaringly lit, their bells hard and clanging. But the names on their

direction boards were names I did not know. I did not know what city I was in, or whether I had a dwelling-place somewhere thereabouts, or what I had to do so that I would not have to go on walking. (40-1)]

The endless streets of the nameless city become (un)furrows, the tracks of a madman. Outside the path of reason and writing, Malte loses himself (“ich verirrte mich”) in an infinite proliferation of dead-ends that are somehow also endless (“wenn dann kein Ende da war”), where no *auf und ab* is possible because there are too many ways, too many streets (“es kamen andere Straßen, die ich nie gesehen hatte, und wieder andere”). The delirium of the streets is, in keeping with its etymology, illegible since Malte cannot read the names on the street cars that move past him (“auf ihren Tafeln standen Namen, die ich nicht kannte”). The way out of this labyrinth (which, in its networks of pathways traversed by electrical currents, is analogous to the neural pathways in his own brain) is paradoxically also the way in: writing. When Malte says, “ich wußte nicht was ich tun mußte, um nicht mehr gehen zu müssen,“ it becomes clear that the way to put an end to his delirious wandering (whether it is through an anonymous city or through his own brain, as his most concrete, material “interiority,” grotesquely exteriorized in this delusion) is to sit down and write down. The escape from the labyrinth of his own brain becomes, all over again, the entrance to the Salpêtrière, this time entered through writing. His literal delirium stops where the figural one beings, and *vice versa*.

#### Part IV: The Risk of Exposure: Cézanne, Rilke and Heidegger

This episode is exemplary of the delirious writing that, I argue, characterizes the entire text. It depicts the literal exposure of the writer’s interiority, a pure inside without an outside that becomes, paradoxically, external, even tangible, to itself. The experience of exposure (*aussetzen*) is essential to the figure of delirium that I describe above. To conclude this chapter, I reflect on the difference between the exposure of

the *Aufzeichnungen* (which both concludes and cancels an entire phase of Rilke's development), and the sense of exposure in the poem "Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens" (1914), which suggests the significance of the *Aufzeichnungen* for Rilke's later writings.

We have already described how Malte's poetics of delirium begins at the point where he is ex-posed, put outside the artistic process. When his incorporative model of writing verse no longer holds, Malte is deprived of his memories, his consciousness and even his own body.<sup>122</sup> But this exposure also has a productive sense in that it inaugurates for Malte a new mode of writing both beyond the fixed form of mere *Verse* as the expression of pure verse, that is, of turns and tropes: delirium. Delirious writing could be thought of as the formal undoing of form, the form that seeks to suspend form at least for a moment, for the sake (of a phantasm) of total seeing. The German "aussetzen" can also help us to designate this suspension of form. Among its other meanings (to expose, to abandon, to put up for display), "aussetzen" can signify suspension or temporary interruption. To say that delirious writing "setzt die Form aus" suggests a whole dialectical range of meanings: this kind of writing suspends form insofar as it both abandons form altogether and reveals or exposes it as such.

"Aussetzen" is also linked to "der Aussätzige," (the leper, i.e., he who has been cast out by society, whose skin is exposed to violent eruptions of disease), a figure which Malte relates to his new poetics of *das Versäumte*.<sup>123</sup> This entry in the

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<sup>122</sup> For Walter Sokel, in his essay "Zwischen Existenz und Weltinnenraum: Zum Prozeß der Entlichung im Malte Laurids Brigge" (in *Rilke Heute: Beziehungen und Wirkungen*. Ed. Ingeborg H. Solbrig and Joachim W. Storck. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1975. pp. 105-129) this exposure contains the paradox that Malte ultimately overcomes: "Das 'eigene Leben' Maltes, das er in reichlichem Ausmaß hat, liegt gerade in dem, was er von den Leuten zu verbergen sucht, in seinem Elend, *seinem Ausgesetztsein*, seiner Angst. Seine Negativität ist sein Positives" (120 emphasis added JD). Malte's journey toward authenticity, toward the destruction of his inauthentic "ich" necessarily moves through the negative experience of exposure toward a more properly existential expression.

<sup>123</sup> Anette Schwarz emphasizes the connection between leprosy and Rilke's/Malte's poetics in her essay, pp. 203-4. The passage appears in section 22 of the *Aufzeichnungen* ("Ich versuche es, Dir zu schreiben..."), pp. 774-6.

*Aufzeichnungen* is in fact an almost literal transposition from Rilke's letters to Clara Rilke of October 1907 (the so-called *Briefe an Cézanne*), and it is worth discussing this complex intertextual moment in some detail here.<sup>124</sup> The original passage from the Rilke's letter reads:

Erst mußte das künstlerische Anschauen sich so weit überwunden haben, auch im Schrecklichen und scheinbar nur Widerwärtigem das Seiende zu sehen, das, mit allem anderen Seienden, *gilt*. Sowenig eine Auswahl zugelassen ist, ebensowenig ist eine Abwendung von irgendwelcher Existenz dem Schaffenden erlaubt [. . .]. Dies sich zu dem Aussätzigen-Legen und alle eigene Wärme bis zu der Herzwärme der Liebesnächte, mit ihm teilen: dies muß irgendwann im Dasein eines Künstlers gewesen sein, als Überwindung zu seiner neuen Seligkeit. (2: 393-4)

[The vision of the artist had to steel itself so far as to see in terrible and apparently only repulsive things the Existing which, in common with all other being, *has value*. As little as any selection is permissible to him, so little is it permitted to the creator to turn away from any form of existence whatever [. . .] This lying-down with the leper and sharing with him all one's warmth, even to the heart's warmth of love-nights – this must have existed at some time or other in the artist's being as the tribulation attendant on his new serenity. (157)]

The leper as “der Aussätzige” is to be recuperated by an overcoming of conventional aesthetic vision (*Anschauen*) that no longer sees and judges the outward forms of objects as beautiful (or disgusting), but sees the objects of its vision as *beings*. A being as such, even if its appearance is repulsive, is valid, has value (*gilt*), and an artist can make no selections, can turn away from not a single detail of what he sees, no matter how difficult or unpleasant.<sup>125</sup> This ontological seeing, which here Rilke calls the “laying-oneself-close-to-the-one-who-has-been-ex-posed” (i.e., the leper), *redeems* all the objects of artistic vision as beings, and redeems the artist himself as well: it is the

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<sup>124</sup> The letters have been published separately as *Briefe an Cézanne*. Ed. Clara Rilke. Afterword Hans Weigand Petzet. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1952. I will cite according to Rilke's *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902-1921*. Vol. 2. Eds. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber. Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1930; and in English, *Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1902-1926*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. London: Macmillan & Co., 1947.

<sup>125</sup> Another important intertext for this passage (both in the *Briefe* and the *Aufzeichnungen*) is Baudelaire's “Une Charogne” from the *Fleurs du Mal* (1857).

way to a “neuen Seligkeit.” But there is clearly a gap that arises between the clarity of this insight and the opacity of Malte’s experiences (and their writing-down). The gap, which is a variation of the same gap we have already seen disavowed in the *Worpswede* monograph, foreshadows the delirium of the *Aufzeichnungen* in Rilke’s own words, and makes explicit the problem of vision for this model of delirious writing

Rilke studied the paintings of Cézanne in October of 1907 (squarely in the middle of the six-year period during which he also worked on the *Aufzeichnungen*), and it served, like the *Worpswede* and *Rodin* monographs, as an occasion to reflect on the task of the artist in general through the figure of the visual artist in particular. We have already seen how, in the *Worpswede* monograph, the gap between the painter and the poet is resolved through the endless interchangeability of metaphor. In the *Briefe*, Rilke does not disavow the gap, but rather confronts it as such, implying the possibility that the writing that responds to visual imperatives will run up against some limit that will expose it to delirium.

Rilke endows Cézanne’s painting with ontological depth: Cézanne does not merely paint objects (in his portraits, still-lives and landscapes), rather he makes *things* which, born out of endless artistic work and sublimated love, attain a more profound being than the “real” objects they represent. One thinks of (Rilke’s description of) Cézanne’s coffee cup or his portrait of the woman in the red chair: these are not just things or objects, but beings (*Seiendes*) endowed with existence (*Vorhandensein*) that are not merely to be looked at, but rather need to be experienced and confirmed as a *Tatsache* (see 389-95). Rilke writes, “Nicht *der* (endlich muß ich es doch einsehen), *der* aus so privatem Gesichtspunkte Bilder begreift, ist berechtigt, über [Cézannes Bilder] zu schreiben; wer sie ruhig in ihrem Vorhandensein zu bestätigen wüßte, ohne an ihnen mehr und anderes als Tatsachen zu erleben, würde ihnen sicher am



gerechtesten sein” (2: 390) [“Nobody (I realize this at last) who apprehends pictures from such a private standpoint is justified in writing about them; only a person able to acknowledge them in their actuality, quietly, without experiencing them otherwise than as plain facts, only such a person, surely, could do them justice” (2: 155)]. The neutral, sober experience of things as they are and the artistic work, guided by patience and love, that stays relentlessly true to this experience, constitute the task of *sachliches Sagen*, which Cézanne has already realized in painting and which Rilke wishes to attain in writing, beginning first of all with these very letters.

But, in the *Briefe*, putting this into writing presents a tension which, in contrast to *Worpswede*, Rilke is not willing to overlook. Rilke points out the difficulties Cézanne himself had in writing about his painting. Cézanne, via Rilke, insisted that his strength as a painter lay in the unconsciousness of his artistic process:

Der Maler dürfte nicht zum Bewußtsein seiner Einsichten kommen (wie der Künstler überhaupt): ohne den Umweg durch seine Reflexion zu nehmen, müssen seine Fortschritte, ihm selber rätselhaft, so rasch in die Arbeit eintreten, daß er sie in dem Moment ihres Übertritts nicht zu erkennen vermag. (2: 401)

[The painter ought not to become conscious of his knowledge (and this goes for the artist in general): without taking the roundabout road of his own reflection – each step forward, enigmatic even to himself, must enter so quickly into his work that he is unable to recognize its moment of transition. (158)]

Artistic insights should make no detour through conscious reflection, but rather should manifest themselves directly in the work itself. Thus what impresses Rilke most in Cézanne’s painting is his ability to see simply and to paint with a clear conscience, unburdened by self-consciousness or the guilt of *Versäumen*. In a conversation with a friend (Mathilde Vollmoeller), who he one day invited to the Cezanne exhibition, Rilke reports:

‘Hier,’ sagte sie, auf eine Stelle zeigend, ‘dieses hat er gewußt, und nun sagt er es (eine Stelle an einem Apfel); nebenan ist es noch frei, weil er das noch nicht gewußt hat. Er machte nur, was er wußte, nichts

anderes.' 'Was muß er für ein gutes Gewissen gehabt haben,' sagte ich. 'O ja: glücklich war er, ganz innen irgendwo. . .' (2: 375)

[ 'Here,' she said, pointing to the spot, 'he knew what he wanted and said it (part of an apple); but there it is still open, because he didn't yet know. He only did what he knew, nothing else. 'What a good conscience he must have had,' I said. 'Oh yes, he was happy somewhere right inside him. . . (150)]

On another visit, Rilke adds:

Als ob diese Farben einem die Unentschlossenheit abnehmen ein für allemal. Das gute Gewissen dieser Rots, dieser Blaus, ihre einfache Wahrhaftigkeit erzieht einen; und stellt man sich so bereit als möglich unter sie, so ist es, als täten sie etwas für einen. (2: 378)

[It is as if these colors took away all your indecisions for ever and ever. The good conscience of these reds, these blues – their simple truthfulness teaches you; and if you place yourself among them as receptively as you can they seem to be doing something for you. (151-2)]

Cézanne's conscience is so clear not necessarily in moral terms (though Rilke consistently describes artistic work as a moral or religious duty, and indeed seems to experience his own idleness and indecision as something sinful or to be expiated), but because he has a conscience in the sense of *conscientia*, Mit-wissen, a kind of automatic co-knowing or intuition that guides his artistic process. Rilke even goes so far as to equate this intuition with an animal perception and way of being. In one of Cézanne's self-portraits, Rilke sees "eine animalische Aufmerksamkeit [. . .], die in den, durch keinen Liderschlag unterbrochenen Augen eine Ausdauernde, sachliche Wachheit unterhält" (2: 408) ["an animal attentiveness which maintains a continuing, objective vigilance in the unwinking eyes" (163)]; elsewhere he imagines how Cézanne "sitzt im Garten wie ein alter Hund, der Hund dieser Arbeit, die ihn wieder ruft und ihn schlägt und hungern läßt" (2: 369) ["sits in the garden like an old dog, the dog of this work which calls him again and beats him and lets him go hungry" (148)]; and his friend Vollmoeller says, "'Wie ein Hund hat er davorgesessen und einfach geschaut, ohne alle Nervosität und Nebenabsicht'" (2: 375) ["'Like a dog he sat in

front of it and simply looked, without any nervousness or irrelevant speculation” (150)]. In this animal perception, Cézanne remains almost impossibly close to nature, and his work, as pure conscience devoid of consciousness, as perception without recognition (*erkennen*), simply *is* his natural way of being.<sup>126</sup>

That Cézanne would write *about* his painting is a contradiction, if not an impossibility. But Rilke dwells on this contradiction, describing Cézanne’s attempts, in his personal letters to reflect on his work:

Ein schreibender Maler, einer also, der keiner war, hat auch Cézanne durch seine Briefe veranlaßt, malerische Angelegenheiten antwortend auszusprechen; aber wie sehr ist es, wenn man die paar Briefe des Alten [d. h., Cézannes] sieht, bei einem unbeholfenen, ihm selber äußert widerwärtigen Ansatz zur Aussprache geblieben. Fast nichts konnte er sagen. Die Sätze, in denen er es versuchte, werden lang, verwickeln sich, sträuben sich, bekommen Knoten, und er läßt sie schließlich liegen, außer sich vor Wut. (402)

[A literary painter, a painter, therefore, who was no painter at all, by reason of his letters once caused Cézanne to expatiate in his replies on matters relative to painting; but, when you see the old man’s few letters, you realise how absolutely jammed he was in the helpless beginnings, distasteful even to himself, of articulate speech! He could say practically nothing. The sentences in which he makes the attempt grow longer and longer, complicate themselves, refuse to go on, tie themselves up in knots, and finally he leaves them, beside himself with rage. (159)]

Cézanne’s language, *via* Rilke, becomes complicated and knotty, bristles like an animal (*sträuben sich*), and he ends up enraged, beside himself, ex-posed, reeling in a delirium that results from the introduction of a verbal horizon to a purely painterly aesthetic.

Indeed, in certain passages from these letters that Rilke describes, Cézanne speaks explicitly to the dangers and limits of the literary in painting: “[The painter]

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<sup>126</sup> In the terms of the eighth Duino elegy, Cézanne is a creature, more animal than human, existing in an immediate, unconscious proximity to nature, being, *das Offene*. And in terms of the *Aufzeichnungen*, where Malte proclaims, “alles ist überall, und man müßte in allem sein, um nichts zu versäumen“ (895), Cézanne is *in* everything, *in* everywhere.

must beware of the literary spirit which so often causes painting to deviate from its true path – the concrete study of nature – to lose itself all too long in intangible speculations” (19); and “Literature expresses itself by abstractions, whereas painting, by means of drawing and color, gives concrete shape to sensations and perceptions” (20).<sup>127</sup> That literature must remain abstract and can never attain the sensory, perceptual *Sachlichkeit* of painting stands precisely in the way of the *literary* program of *sachliches Sagen*. But this insight is not lost on Rilke, who, in the very same series of letters on Cézanne, characterizes the still incomplete draft of the *Aufzeichnungen* as the very illustration of this paradox:

Und mit einem Mal (und zum ersten) begreife ich das Schicksal des Malte Laurids. Ist es nicht das, daß diese Prüfung ihn überstieg, daß er sie am Wirklichen nicht bestand, obwohl er in der Idee von ihrer Notwendigkeit überzeugt war, so sehr, daß er sie so lange instinktiv aufsuchte, bis sie sich an ihn hängte und ihn nicht mehr verließ? Das Buch von Malte Laurids, wenn es einmal geschrieben sein wird, wird nichts als das Buch dieser Einsicht sein, erwiesen an einem, für den sie zu ungeheuer war. Vielleicht *bestand* er ja auch: denn er schrieb den Tod des Kammerherrn; aber wie ein Raskolnikov blieb er, von seiner Tat aufgebraucht, zurück, nicht weiterhandelnd im Moment, wo das Handeln erst beginnen mußte, so daß die neue errungene Freiheit sich gegen ihn wandte und ihn, den Wehrlosen, zerriß. (2: 394-5)

[And all at once (and for the first time) I understand the fate of Malte. Is it not that this ordeal was too much for him, that he could not pass it *in reality* although he was convinced *ideally* of its necessity, so much so that he instinctively sought it and sought it until it clung to him and no longer left him? The book of Malte, once it is written, will be nothing but the book of this knowledge, exemplified in one for whom it was too tremendous. Possibly he did triumph after all: for he wrote the death of the Chamberlain; but, like a Raskolnikov, he remained behind, consumed by his deed, ceasing to act at the very moment when action had to begin, so that his newly acquired freedom turned against him and destroyed him, the weaponless. (157-8)]

The test that Malte fails, the *Seligkeit* that he does not attain, is defined as: “das einfache Leben einer Liebe, die bestanden hat, die ohne sich dessen zu rühmen, zu

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<sup>127</sup> From *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed Herschel Chipp. UCLA Press, 1969.

allem tritt, unbegleitet, unauffällig, wortlos“ (394). It is not clear to what extent Rilke is aware that this failure is a verbal-visual impasse, for how could Malte, a poet, seek out and approach reality in a way that is so neutral and self-effacing as to be *wortlos*? In any case, Rilke’s insight into his work-in-progress, the *Aufzeichnugen*, is that its protagonist is not capable of the *sachliches Sagen* described in the letters, and the book, if it is to be completed, will have to be the inscription of precisely that failure.

Yet the *Aufzeichnungen* also predict a new mode of writing (*die andere Auslegung*) when Malte’s suffering—and the suffering he registers in the outcast and as “das zähe Leben”—will in turn be redeemed: “Oh, es fehlt nur ein kleines, und ich könnte das alles begreifen und gutheißen. Nur ein Schritt, und mein tiefes Elend würde Seligkeit sein.” (6: 756). Since Malte’s suffering (and his inscription of that suffering into his text) consists in his exposure, we can follow the word itself into one of Rilke’s later poems to see perhaps the beginning of that “andere Auslegung.” The poem, untitled, from September 1914, reads as follows:

Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens. Siehe, wie klein dort,  
 siehe: die letzte Ortschaft der Worte, und höher,  
 aber wie klein auch, noch ein letztes  
 Gehöft von Gefühl. Erkennst du’s?  
 Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens. Steingrund  
 unter den Händen. Hier blüht wohl  
 einiges auf; aus stummen Absturz  
 blüht ein unwissendes Kraut singend hervor.  
 Aber der Wissende? Ach, der zu wissen begann  
 und schweigt nun, ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens.  
 Da geht wohl, heilen Bewußtseins,  
 manches umher, manches gesicherte Bergtier,  
 wechselt und weilt. Und der große geborgene Vogel  
 kreist um der Gipfel reine Verweigerung. – Aber  
 ungeborgen, hier auf den Bergen des Herzens . . . .

[Exposed on the heart’s mountains. Look, how small there!  
 look, the last hamlet of words, and, higher,  
 (but still how small!) yet one remaining  
 farmhouse of feeling: d’you see it?  
 Exposed on the heart’s mountains. Virgin rock  
 under the hands. Though even here

something blooms: from the dumb precipice  
 an unknowing plant blooms singing into the air.  
 But what of the knower? Ah, he began to know  
 and holds his peace, exposed on the heart's mountains.  
 While, with undivided mind,  
 many, maybe, many well-assured mountain beasts,  
 pass there and pause. And the mighty sheltered bird  
 circles the summits' pure refusal. – But oh,  
 no longer sheltered, here on the heart's mountains. . . ]<sup>128</sup>

Is there some fundamental difference between the exposure of these two texts? What has Rilke learned by 1914 that he didn't know in 1910, when he published the *Aufzeichnungen*?<sup>129</sup> In this poem, one sees the result of a certain transcending or renouncing of language, expression and creativity. The poet has abandoned both the Worpswedian landscape and the cityscape for a kind of inward, absolute landscape: the mountains of the heart, inhabited by words, feelings, and animals, where the human (*der Wissende*) is *exposed*, neither here (where the animals linger, in their blissfully full and pure consciousness), nor there (where words and emotions reach their final limit). The poem is neither a lament at the foreclosure of human feeling and expression nor a joyous approximation to the fullness of animal being. The poet rather seems to be waiting, standing still, between these two worlds, accepting “the pure refusal of the peaks” and his unshelteredness, or, if not accepting, then, more ambiguously, remaining silent (“Aber der Wissende? Ach, der zu wissen begann / und schweigt nun, ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens”). The trailing-off of the final lines (“Aber / ungeborgen, hier auf den Bergen des Herzens. . .”) speaks the suggestive non-speech of silence, an utterance itself neither here nor there, neither

<sup>128</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke. *Selected Works. Volume II, Poetry*. Trans. J. B. Leishman. London: Hogarth Press, 1976, pp. 313-4.

<sup>129</sup> Insofar as all Rilke's poetry tends toward the poetry of the “late Rilke,” I follow Beda Allemann here in noting that in 1914 Rilke also writes the poem “Es winkt zu Fühlung fast aus allen Dingen” in which he first uses the term “Weltinnenraum” to refer to the transcendence of inside and outside. And in 1913 Rilke writes of the “Erlebnis” in which he encounters “die andere Seite der Natur,” a poetic precursor to *Weltinnenraum*. Rilke's reading of Hölderlin (see the poem “An Hölderlin” also written in 1914) must play a role as well in Rilke's shift away from or beyond the delirium of the *Aufzeichnungen*, particularly in their constant reversal of interiority and exteriority and temporal suspension.

saying nor not saying. However that silence is to be interpreted, it is a fundamentally different gesture or position than the one found in the *Aufzeichnungen*, where exposure had to be met not with silence or renunciation, but with as much (written) language as possible. Malte's being-neither-here-nor-there leads him into a delirium of writing, in which he tries to restore himself, through writing, to the inside, to being once again at home in his body, in his past, in the city, in the world. But the words he writes assume the very profusion and excess of the visual impressions and thoughts that drove him outside, out of the furrows, in the first place. Malte's being-neither-here-nor-there is therefore a delirious oscillation, the involuntary undoing and redoing of self through language. The being-neither-here-nor-there of this later poem, however, suggests a conscious *choice*, some kind of willed resolution or resignation simply to stand between the two extremes where Malte could not keep still.

Martin Heidegger's 1946 text on Rilke, "Wozu Dichter?" may illuminate precisely this distinction.<sup>130</sup> Weighing Rilke against Hölderlin on the scales of the titular poeto-ontological question, Heidegger shows how Rilke's poetry risks itself in an experience of radical exposure (*Ungeschutzsein*) that would reach down into the modern abyss of godlessness and ontological oblivion and trace a human path back to Being. Heidegger shows how the word "risk" (*Wagnis*) is linked etymologically to "scale" (die Wage), hence also to the back-and-forth movement (*bewegen*) of the objects on the scale. But that which is at risk—weighed, exposed to a back-and-forth movement, the outcome or resolution of which is as yet unknown—that which is risked and exposed in this way is ultimately also protected and secured. "Damit ist das

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<sup>130</sup> Though the language of poetry was the art form that Heidegger valorized most, Otto Pöggeler has traced some of the connections between modern painting and Heidegger's later thought, particularly between Van Gogh, Cézanne and the Worpswede colony. It seems that Heidegger's late reflections on Cézanne (which even include a poem entitled "Cézanne") were greatly influenced through his reading of Rilke's letters on the painter. However, Heidegger's interest in Worpswede had less to do with the poet's monograph than with the most famous painter that Rilke neglected (*versäumt*) to mention there, namely Paula Modersohn-Becker. See Pöggeler, *Bild und Technik: Heidegger, Klee und die moderne Kunst*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002, especially pp. 159-94.

Gewagte zwar ungeschützt, aber, weil es auf der Wage liegt, ist es vom Wagnis einbehalten. Es ist getragen. Es bleibt von seinem Grund her in diesem geborgen. [. . .] Das Ungeschützsein des Gewagten schließt ein Sichersein in seinem Grunde nicht nur nicht aus, sondern notwendig ein” (281) [“Thereby what is risked is indeed unsheltered, but since it lies on the balance, it is retained by the risk. It is sustained. It continues to be saved by its ground in its ground. [. . .] What is risked is unsheltered; but not only does this not exclude a safebeing in its ground, it necessarily implies it” (210)].<sup>131</sup> To be truly at risk is to be already always guaranteed by the risk itself, which carries and sustains what is exposed to risk, protects the “Schutzlos” from annihilation (*Vernichtung*). Outside the risk of being at risk, of being weighed and subjected to an oscillation without certainty, there is the still greater danger of annihilation. For Heidegger, the power of Rilke’s poetry lies in its exposing itself to a risk, *willing* a risk, that is at the same time the protection from annihilation.<sup>132</sup>

The poem of Rilke’s that informs Heidegger’s etymological understanding of risk and gives him the necessary *Grundworte* for his questioning of Rilke’s poetry is an untitled poem (first line “Wie die Natur die Wesen überläßt”) dating from 1924. Rilke calls it an improvised verse and notes in a letter to Clara Rilke that he inscribed it in an edition of the *Aufzeichnungen* that he was giving to a friend (276). It is certainly no accident that Rilke wanted to inscribe precisely such a poem (on the sheltering powers of risk and of the ultimate affirmation of an exposed life) in the opening pages of the *Aufzeichnungen*, where the risk is precisely not guaranteed, where the oscillation knows no center, rather only a delirious turning-itself-inside-out. It is as if Rilke’s belated epigraph should redeem what was *versäumt* in the

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<sup>131</sup> Heidegger, *Holzwege*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1951; *Off the Beaten Track*. Ed. and Trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>132</sup> There is a similar logic to the distinction between “problem” and “aporia” in the passages I cite from Derrida’s *Aporias* in the Introduction.



*Aufzeichnungen*.

Before the sheltering exposure of the silence of “Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens,” Rilke depicts a different “exposure” in the *Aufzeichnungen*: Malte is both deprived of his body by an endlessly proliferating language that he cannot control (i.e., the verses that he cannot write), and also deprived of language by the monstrously proliferating outgrowth and fragmentation of a body (i.e., *das Große*) that is equally out of his control. Delirious writing, I suggest, could be thought as the language of that deprivation, the verbal expression that tries and fails to reverse the entropy of a neglected world (*das Versäumte*). Malte is thus engaged in the permanent task of learning to see and writing-down that ceaselessly avoids the form that would pin it down, localize it (as on a map, in an apartment building, in a clinic) and kill it, in which case the writing would be *versäumt*, left unfinished alongside the entropic mass of human experience that has never been seen and written down as it *needed* to be written down.

Rönne—the protagonist of Benn’s 1914 story “Gehirne,” which I discuss in the next chapter—shows a similar preoccupation with “das Versäumte” – with what has gone unnoticed, disappeared, with what had once belonged to a person, time or place and has now faded without a trace. There is a vast imperative in both texts (*Malte* and “Gehirne”) to write down and record a certain fragility or preciousness of experience that would be crushed by any particular form, but that deserves or needs some kind of expression nevertheless. That imperative is also, I argue, issued primarily in visual terms, presupposing that the fundamental impasse that these two writers face (and, *mutatis mutandis*, Worringer faces as well) lies between a model of vision and a corresponding style of writing. We will see how Benn’s response is stylistically closer to Malte’s “other interpretation,” how Benn approaches the realization of what Malte may have meant when he wrote: “es wird kein Wort auf dem anderen bleiben, und

jeder Sinn wird wie Wolken sich auflösen und wie Wasser niedergehen” (6: 756) [“not one word will be left upon another, and all the meanings will dissolve like clouds and fall like rain” (34)].

## CHAPTER 4

### FORM ON THE BRAIN: HAPTIC VISION AND DELIRIOUS WRITING IN BENN'S "GEHIRNE"

Was ist es denn mit den Gehirnen?

—Benn, "Gehirne"

Benn wrote the short prose piece "Gehirne" in the summer of 1914 while stationed as a military physician in occupied Belgium.<sup>133</sup> It was published one year later in the expressionist journal *Die weißen Blätter*, and again in 1916 as the title text in a collection five of Benn's Rönne "Novellen." Peter Hohendahl situates this text within the Expressionist canon, but also shows the limitations of such a periodizing approach.<sup>134</sup> Rather than explaining the significance of this text for this movement, which to my mind amounts to a kind of explaining-away, I try read it closely and interpret it on its own terms, even if those terms are a certain kind incomprehensibility, literalness or lack of hermeneutic depth. Three ideas emerge out of this reading: a theory of haptic vision, an elaboration of delirious writing, and the problem of reading a text that does not so much perform its unreadability, as it simply and inexorable *states* it.

Delirious writing, defined in the previous chapter as the textual manifestation of a failed resolution of interiority vs. exteriority or experience vs. expression, appears again in Benn's text. In Rilke's case, the failure is the culmination of years of study

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<sup>133</sup> For an account of Benn's activities while stationed in occupied Belgium (which weaves in analysis of Benn's literary and autobiographical writing from and/or about this period), see pp. 239-71 in Hubert Roland's *Die deutsche literarische "Kriegskolonie" in Belgien, 1914-1918. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutsch-belgischen Literaturbeziehungen 1900-1920*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 1999.

<sup>134</sup> Simply applying the word "Expressionist" to a text and pointing out its subversion of traditional categories of narrative realism still raises question, for Hohendahl, about the nature of modernism vs. the avant-garde and the relation of the aesthetic to the political. In a similar way, I wish to conceive the difficulties of reading this text as a point of departure, not a conclusion. See "The Loss of Reality: Gottfried Benn's Early Prose" in *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism*. Ed. Bathrick / Huyssen. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

and work in poetry and on the visual arts; in Benn's case, I argue that this "failure" serves as a starting point. Benn, in his *Morgue* poems (1912), had already begun his literary career with a kind of eulogy for realist/naturalist representation and for verses (in Malte's initial sense of the word); he sought thereafter for a kind of pure or abstract form of poetic expression that would neither refer to the reality of the external, empirical world, nor express the inner world or authentic existence of an *ich*. His delirium, then, is the search for the abstract, poetic word, whose radical aesthetic power is not susceptible to *ich*-bound intentionality, nor can it be captured in concrete, textual form. Nevertheless, this word needs an *ich* and a form to speak through, however fleetingly. Benn's delirium, having given up the *ich* that Malte, however ambiguously, still holds on to, moves further toward the expression of the force of exteriority that is not entirely outside expression, but rather the *outside of* expression.

I regard Benn primarily as a poet, hence my emphasis on the problem of *poetic* expression. But I do not mean to overlook his later prose works, essays and autobiographical writing. Benn himself effaces the distinction between poetry and critical writing in his speech "Probleme der Lyrik," and I likewise presume that Benn's prose is always poetic and that his poetry always expresses the critical "absoluteness" that he aspires to in his prose writing. "Gehirne" already anticipates both: the incomprehensibility and autonomy of the sentence that characterizes a later text like *Roman des Phänotyp* (1944) and the montage of words that we have already seen in "Staatsbibliothek."

As a point of departure for my reading of Benn's "Gehirne," I want to cite a particularly enigmatic passage from De Man's chapter on Rilke in *Allegories of Reading* (1979). On the possibility of a poetics of pure "figure," he writes:

The figure stripped of any seduction besides that of its rhetorical elasticity can form, together with other figures, constellations of figures that are inaccessible to meaning and to the senses, located far beyond any concern for life or for death in the hollow space of an unreal sky.

Exploiting the ambiguity of “figure” (both as rhetorical trope and visual shape), I want to ask what a language of figures without meaning or sensuousness would be, beyond life and human concern, and I want to ask whether Benn gives us such a language. This entails a kind of haptic reading in which the reader must literally hang on the writer’s every word.

## Part I: “Brains” and Hands

In the poem “Satzbau” (1950), Benn develops the concept of primal positing as the basis of poetic creation. Eschewing the traditional thematics of lyric poetry (for him, *Himmel, Liebe und Grab*), he writes, “Was aber neu ist, ist die Frage nach dem Satzbau / und die ist dringend: / Warum drücken wir etwas aus?”<sup>135</sup> One possible answer to the question of *Satzbau*, of building sentences, of syntax (which overlaps with the question of expression in general) is: “ein Antrieb in der Hand, / ferngesteuert, eine Gehirnlage.” Poetic creation seems to be a physical and physiological act for Benn, it is always *writing*, an act comprised of the motorized gesture of the hand in conjunction with a particular brain state. The “moods” or “feelings” that we might imagine Benn experienced while writing poetry are thus refused any elevation to the ethereal or transcendental. Such “feelings” are reduced to a particular, indeed, *random* concatenation of neurochemicals and synaptic rhythms in the brain, indeed a brain with a particular genealogy. According to Benn’s theory of the “Zeitalter der Genealogie,” (from the autobiographical *Doppelleben* of 1949) we see how the late 19<sup>th</sup> century organic, positivist models that shape the natural sciences and the understanding of culture and history are turned inward for Benn: the whole system of “anthropometrischen Messungen [. . .] ist [. . .] eine seelische Welt

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<sup>135</sup> I: 238.

geworden, tief erregend und das Innere gestaltend.”<sup>136</sup> If the structures of knowledge of the outside world are turned inward, then the brain becomes a kind of de-mythicized origin of self, personality, creativity, but an origin that also radically calls into question the concepts of self, personality, and creativity. Helmut Lethen has argued that Benn’s Rönne-persona reflects not only his deep immersion in 19<sup>th</sup> century positivist thought, particularly in the context of *Hirnforschung*, but also his inability to reconcile himself to the fundamental presuppositions of that scientific world-view, namely the total fragmentation of the self.<sup>137</sup> Rönne’s scientific background thus initiates a nervous break-down that, in his case, needs to be resolved aesthetically. In Lethen’s view, Rönne does not attain that aesthetic resolution, hence his constant oscillation between psychic disintegration and attempts to fulfill the very social and professional role (that of physician) that engenders that disintegration. Unlike Rönne’s colleagues, Rönne cannot function socially not because he questions the scientific world-view of his colleagues, but because he adheres to it too closely:

[Benn] zeigt die Rituale und den begrenzten Handlungsraum der Ärzte und erschließt mit Rönne vorbewusste Regionen der Seele. Er setzt die Figur des Außenseiters auf die schiefe Ebene seines Textes, auf der sich alle Kollegen halten können und nur Rönne abgleitet, über den Rand kippt, in Trance versinkt, in der er nicht mehr Herr seiner selbst ist, sondern Spielball willkürlicher ‘Wallungen.’ (73)

The “Wallungen” that Lethen refers to here suggest the famous “Wallungswert” of the poetic word that Benn refers to in “Epilog und lyrisches Ich.” It is the aesthetic alternative to the age of genealogy that seeks to understand the soul in terms of brain physiology. Creativity itself would be a fleeting, sporadic necessity, somewhere between biology and logos, endowed with metaphysical force and always on the edge of trance, vertigo, delirium.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> IV: 154.

<sup>137</sup> See chapters 2 (“Der böse Rönne”) and 3 (“Schulen der Wahrnehmung”) of Helmut Lethen’s recent biography of Benn, *Der Sound der Väter*. Rowohlt: Berlin, 2006.

<sup>138</sup> Lethen suggests that Benn’s attempts to heal aesthetically the disintegration of his personality are more successful in poetry than in prose: “Wenn Rönne mit seiner Flucht aus der ‘Hirnkultur’ einen

But Gottfried Benn's early prose piece "Gehirne" is saturated primarily *not* with the images of brains, but rather with the images of *hands*. The brains named in the title only appear in the last paragraph of the text, whereas we see the word "hands" at least once on every page. In trying to get a *handle* on this difficult, experimental text, to get a *grip* on it, that is, to read it *closely*, we might begin our reading with the question "What is it then with *hands*?" before we can answer the question raised in the epigraph, though a few preliminary answers are already ready-to-hand. Hands touch what is tangible, concrete, graspable. In German, "to grasp" is only one degree of abstraction, one monosyllabic prefix away from "to conceive": *greifen*, *begreifen*. The grasp of a hand isolates an object from its context, pulls it away from its background, *ab-tracts* it quite literally, thus turning a thing into a concept. Hands are the intersection of the concrete and the abstract, where the ground of the lofty realm of concepts is to be grasped materially, where the material and the physical are to be conceived abstractly. In German, hands also handle (*handeln*); they act, make, practice, they are the means by which the thinking *ich* takes hold of the outside word. In a theory of haptic vision, hands are even organs of sight, the originary ground on which perception and space are organized, the true vision for which optic or ocular vision is but a substitute. The hand is also the source of *behandeln*, treatment in the medical sense. The physician treats the sick by a laying-on of hands—the diagnosis and treatment of symptoms consist of their readability and tangibility by medical instruments that are, in the last or most literal analysis, extensions of the human hand. Finally, the hand also writes, the hand holds the stylus, it is the source or motor of style in a literal sense. In Benn's short text, the image of hands draws together this array of associations (the relation between the abstract-conceptual and the concrete-

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Ausweg gefunden hat, wieso hat Benn sie ihn dann endlos wiederholen lassen? Trotz der scheinbar gelungenen 'Entformung,' bleibt der Satisfaktionstyp [hier typisch wilhelminisch gebildeter Mitglieder des Mittelstandes] an Rönne haften. Dieses Band kann Benn nur in der Lyrik durchschneiden" (49).

tangible; the relation between the inner self and outer world; the structuring of the visual world; and the production of style, of writing) to help reveal the connections between close reading, haptic vision, and delirious writing.

In the first paragraph we meet the protagonist Rönne, a young physician, who, before his transfer to the rural hospital where he serves as acting director and where the “story” of *Gehirne* is set, had performed autopsies for two years at a pathological institute:

[E]r war zwei Jahre lang an einem pathologischen Institut angestellt gewesen, das bedeutet, es waren ungefähr zweitausend Leichen ohne Besinnen durch seine Hände gegangen, und das hatte ihn in einer merkwürdigen und ungeklärten Weise erschöpft. (III: 29)

Over two thousand corpses had passed without reflection *through Rönne’s hands* during this time, and this had exhausted him in a curious and inexplicable way. The narrator mentions only hands and corpses in this passage, adding the phrase “ohne Besinnen” as if to emphasize, needlessly, that neither hands nor corpses are capable of reflection. The phrase “das bedeutet” introduces a flicker of possibility for a higher level of meaning, a conclusion or induction, a movement from the external facts of Rönne’s life to their inward significance for his character or psychology. But this is merely a feint; the sentence remains at this blankly literal level, registering only a statistical number of bodies, the disembodied hands, and the curious exhaustion that cannot exactly be attributed to a person.

This impersonality or depersonalization continues into the second paragraph, which shatters to pieces the “person” of grammatical voice:

Jetzt saß er auf einem Eckplatz und sah in die Fahrt: es geht also durch Weinland, besprach er sich, ziemlich flaches, vorbei an Scharlachfeldern, die rauchen von Mohn. Es ist nicht allzu heiß; ein Blau flutet durch den Himmel, feucht und aufgeweht von Ufern; an Rosen ist jedes Haus gelehnt, und manches ganz versunken. Ich will mir ein Buch kaufen und einen Stift; ich will mir jetzt möglichst vieles aufschreiben, damit nicht alles so herunterfließt. So viele Jahre lebte ich, und alles ist versunken. Als ich anfang, blieb es bei mir? Ich weiß



es nicht mehr. (III, 29)

First we have a third-person narrator who describes Rönne, the protagonist, from the outside. (“Jetzt saß er auf einem Eckplatz und sah in die Fahrt”). Then the narrator begins reporting Rönne’s thoughts indirectly (“besprach er sich”), and presenting them in a kind of free, indirect style, indicating a shift inwards either to a third-person focalized voice, or else an inner monologue: “es geht also durch Weinland, besprach er sich, ziemlich flaches, vorbei an Scharlachfeldern, die rauchen von Mohn.” We notice the inversion (metalepsis) of the sensation of the poppies – the line “should” read as Wolfgang Emmerich has pointed out: scarlet-colored poppy fields (48).<sup>139</sup> The smell of poppy here is an impossible sensation, prefiguring the collapse of inside and outside as structuring principles of perception and personality. Rönne probably could not distinguish the smell of these scarlet fields from a passing train. He associates the smell of poppy with the color of the flowers he sees, and thus hallucinates the fragrance of poppies within the train compartment. In the afterword to the Reclam edition of *Gehirne*, Jürgen Fackert suggests that Benn translates (through the stylistic device of *erlebte Rede*) an impressionistic model of visuality common to paintings of Monet and Renoir.<sup>140</sup> But I would argue that Benn takes the impressionistic model one step further: rather than using literary language to “paint” the fleeting, subjective impression of a landscape, Benn shows how literary language most radically calls the subjectivity of that impression into question. Rönne’s impression of this landscape penetrates inwards from the outside, at the same emanating outwards from the inside: it is thus a composite of memory, fantasy, hallucination and perception that Rönne sometimes experiences as his own, sometimes as belonging to someone or something else. As a disintegration of the moments of synthetic perception, this is more in line with a Deleuzian logic of sensation than a mere visual impressionism. The visual

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<sup>139</sup> See Wolfgang Emmerich, *Gottfried Benn*. Reinbeck: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006.

<sup>140</sup> See p. 56 in *Gehirne*. Ed. Jürgen Fackert. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1974.

Figure of a Bacon painting is represented here through the literary figure of Rönne, an “ich” whose distortion by “invisible forces” happens by means of verbal images. The images that fill or pass through Rönne’s consciousness are sometimes filled with an overwhelming poetic intensity (“ein Blau flutet durch den Himmel, feucht und aufgeweht von Ufern”), sometimes the dullest everyday banality (“es ist nicht allzu heiß”), sometimes utter sterility (“so viele Jahre lebte ich, und alles ist versunken”). But in any case, they disrupt the unity of his self in much the same way that the bodies of Bacon’s figures are disrupted. If there are “painterly” moments in this short text, they would be the montage of neologisms at the end of the text (see below), in which syntax dissolves into the juxtaposition of words, invented words that are pictorial or painterly both as signifiers (a never-before-uttered-or-read word has an immediate, material impact as a sound and as a pattern of letters on a page), and as signified (in terms of rich, impossibly contradictory range of associations they words bring with them—their *Wallungswert*.) The reading of these montage sequences is a kind of haptic reading in which the eye clings to the defamiliarized printed word.

As we read further, we can no longer be certain if this is the narrator’s voice or Rönne’s narrated monologue: “Es ist nicht allzu heiß; ein Blau flutet durch den Himmel, feucht und aufgeweht von Ufern.” The abrupt shift in tone (an everyday comment on the weather juxtaposed to a poetic image of blue flooding the sky, blown up from the banks) only increases our uncertainty. Finally, we encounter perhaps the most violent shift of all into the first person (“Ich will mir ein Buch kaufen und einen Stift; ich will mir jetzt möglichst vieles aufschreiben, damit nicht alles so herunterfließt”), which completes the “progression” of the passage, bringing the relation of narrator to protagonist from the greatest possible distance (third-person external) to the closest proximity (first-person internal). But the movement inwards toward a presumed inner “depth” is only illusory. It is in fact a movement towards an

inner *flatness* that reflects the outside (“ziemlich flaches”)—Rönne’s inside is as flat, crooked and sunken as the landscape and houses he glimpses from the train. This *ich* has no internal coherence: the interior is constantly penetrated by the exterior or else the exterior is perceived only according to the figures that shape Rönne’s self-image. Images of sunkenness and receding flux are to be found on either side of the inside/outside border, and so the narrative move “inwards” to the first person does not necessarily bring the reader any closer to the subject of this writing.

Another way to formulate this problem would be to distinguish linguistically between two kinds of subjects: the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the statement. In this paragraph and throughout the text, there is a disassociation of these two subjects. The subject of the statement remains Rönne throughout, i.e. the “content” of what is said refers predominantly to him or emanates from his brain. The text is “about” him insofar as he is the subject of the statements that compose the text. However, the subject of the enunciation, i.e. the voice that “speaks” the statements in the text, is constantly shifting perspective. The “ich” might as well be an “er” or even a “du”. This is a significant narrative innovation at the level of the statement because the reader is refused a stable epistemological point from which to understand Rönne, just as Rönne is refused a stable point of self-understanding. But grammatically it is only also the simple shifting of gears from first to third, passing through neutral along the way. In this way the text activates grammar itself as a source of meaning. The explosion of grammatical person goes hand in hand with the explosion of Rönne’s person-ality.

The *ich* has no consistent relation to the outside, nor any consistent relation to itself – it wants to write down as much as possible to keep everything from flowing away, to grab hold of something through writing and keep it with itself (“bei mir”). Grammatically, as if by coincidence, the *ich* uses a series of indirect pronouns that

echo grammatically the gap in its self-relation (“Ich will *mir* ein Buch kaufen [. . .]; ich will *mir* aufschreiben [. . .]”). The self-relation is only indirect, the *ich* is trying to send a message to itself, to restore itself to itself, through writing. The helps explain the meaning of the enigmatic passage in the following paragraph: “Das Leben ist so allmächtig, dachte er, diese Hand wird es nicht unterwühlen können, und sah seine Rechte an.” (III: 29) “Leben” functions as a cipher for the chaotic flux of the “external” world that ceaselessly merges with and then separates from the “internal” flux of Rönne’s perceptions and associations.<sup>141</sup> The right hand that will try and fail to “burrow underneath” or “undercut” this all-powerful “life” will attempt to do so by writing.

When Rönne arrives at the institute to assume temporary directorship and begins doing the daily work of medical treatment (*Behandlung*), we need only to follow the hands to follow also the act of writing that is interposed between self and world.

[E]s tat ihm wohl, die Wissenschaft in eine Reihe von Handgriffen aufgelöst zu sehen, die gröberen eines Schmiedes, die feineren eines Uhrmachers wert. Dann nahm er selber seine Hände, führte sie über die Röntgenröhre, verschob das Quecksilber der Quarzlampe, erweiterte oder verengte einen Spalt, durch den Licht auf einen Rücken fiel, schob einen Trichter in ein Ohr, nahm Watte und ließ sie im Gehörgang liegen und vertiefte sich in die Folgen dieser Verrichtung bei dem Inhaber des Ohrs: wie sich Vorstellungen bildeten von Helfer, Heilung, guter Arzt von allgemeinem Zutrauen und Weltfreude, und wie sich die Entfernung von Flüssigkeiten in das Seelische verwob. (III: 30)

As he directs the nurses, he can let his hands speak for him, turning the nurses into a kind of tool for him, a tool of “science.” When he himself takes matters into his own hands, he grasps both instruments and human bodies with equal indifference: an x-ray

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<sup>141</sup> In an oft-cited passage in “Epilog und lyrisches Ich,” Benn characterizes the writing of “Gehirne” (while working as a military physician in occupied Belgium) as follows: “[D]as Leben schwang in einer Sphäre von Schweigen und Verlorenheit, ich lebte am Rande, wo das Dasein fällt und das Ich beginnt. Ich denke oft an diese Wochen zurück; sie waren das Leben, sie werden nicht wiederkommen, alles andere war Bruch” (III: 127-8).

machine, a lamp, a back, an ear and the “occupant” of the ear, all these machines and body parts are handled and described (in a word, *treated*) with the same detachment. The relation to his patient is barely verbal, human, or interpersonal. It is the relation between an occupant of an ear who forms certain mental images of a pleasant, capable physician as a result of the alleviating of pressure in his inner ear. The mental event is most crudely reduced to a physical cause in the same way that human physical parts are treated like machines or tools. When the “accident” comes in,<sup>142</sup> Rönne stills appears not to have heard or spoken a single word, felt a single feeling, thought a single thought, or to have observed anything beyond these separable parts. His detachment is complete. Then suddenly he is struck by the “tiefem Zusammenhange mit dem Lauf und dem Schicksal dieses Lebens er [der Finger] gebrochen schien, während er ihn jetzt versorgen mußte wie einen Fernen und Entlaufenen, und er horchte in die Tiefe, wie in dem Augenblick, wo der Schmerz einsetzte, eine fernere Stimme sich vernehmen ließe” (III: 30). Suddenly a *depth* emerges out of the flat, fractured surface of Rönne’s treatment of the scene – perhaps that depth only reveals itself because of the extremity of detachment and superficiality – and Rönne hearkens as a more distant voice makes itself heard. Is it his voice, the patient’s, is it even a human voice? If we can’t yet answer this question, we can at least note that this excess of detachment in feeling and sensation, the clinicality of modern medical science, opens up the possibility of some kind of mystical, hallucinatory sensation.

The more deeply Rönne immerses himself in his duties, the more intense these sensations become, and the more clearly this distant voice lets itself be heard.

Wenn ich durch die Liegenhalle gehe – dies beschäftigte ihn zu tief – in

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<sup>142</sup> “Dann kam ein Unfall” – that is, when a *person* arrives who had had an accident and suffered broken a finger. The trope that Benn uses here is synecdoche / metonymy, in which (body) parts stand for (human) wholes, in which a person is indistinguishable from the accident he suffered, either a case (Fall) or an accident (Unfall), but never quite another person for him. Benn takes this technique to the extreme in his 1917 poem “Nachtcafé” (I:19).

je zwei Augen falle ich, werde wahrgenommen und bedacht. Mit freundlichen oder ernsten Gegenständen werde ich verbunden; vielleicht nimmt ein Haus mich auf, in das sie sich sehnen, vielleicht ein Stuck Gerbholz, das sie einmal schmeckten. Und ich hatte auch einmal zwei Augen, die liefen rückwärts mit ihren Blicken; jawohl, ich war vorhanden: fraglos und gesammelt. Wo bin ich hingekommen? Wo bin ich? Ein kleines Flattern, ein Verwehen. (III: 31)

As Rönne goes on his rounds, he is absorbed by the memories and associations of the patients, absorbed into a house that one patient longs for – the house that Rönne longs for is not mentioned, if there is such a house – or some memory of the taste of *Gerbholz*. Rönne has no memory of his own, only a dim reminder that he once had eyes, too, whose glances “ran backward” in both a spatial and temporal sense: spatially, a glance runs “backward” into the brain, connected the external world *via* nerves to the organic center where impressions and memories are to be stored and organized; temporally, a glance runs “backward” in the sense that it connects the present of what is seen to the past of what is remembered, experienced, felt. When that connection is cut off, when those two eyes cease to “run backwards,” the present is also destroyed because it becomes perpetual and perpetually disorienting.

Rönne used to be there, present, on hand, without question, collected (“vorhanden: fraglos, gesammelt”). Now in the present tense, he asks himself the following questions, that is, a voice again makes itself heard, a voice that might belong to “him,” but that might also be a voice that emanates from him, but beyond him, the same distant voice that comes out of the depths of the “accident” and that here poses such overwhelming questions: “Wo bin ich hingekommen? Wo bin ich?” But in response to this “where” question he can only give a “what” answer: “Ein kleines Flattern, ein Verwehen.” The lack of identity is experienced first as a lack of place; personal disintegration is also a kind of spatial disorientation. The “content” of that disintegration is completely abstract, a flutter, a blowing-away, things which occupy no space and which indicate only a temporal process that is coming to an end, an

image of pure dissolution, disintegration. “Er sann nach, wann es begonnen hätte, aber er wußte es nicht mehr: ich gehe durch eine Straße und sehe ein Haus und erinnere mich eines Schlosses, das ähnlich war in Florenz, aber sie streifen sich nur mit einem Schein und sind erloschen” (III: 31). We notice again the seamless shift from “er” to “ich,” the indifference of grammatical person to the psycho-bio-linguistic problem that (de)composes this text. One house reminds “me” of a castle in Florence, but neither one of them is real, they are only images perhaps seen, perhaps imagined, evaporated from reality, merged into an appearance (*Schein*—an image and a light), a mental, perceptual phenomenon that is quickly extinguished. As soon as the first house is perceived, it merges with the memory of the alleged house in Florence; the space and time of the present come into perception only with the merging (*streifen sich*) of the past, which erases the distinction between them. Rönne exists on the border where that erasure is constantly happening (“Am Rande, wo das Dasein fällt, und das Ich beginnt”), his eyes forced open as it were, unable to “run backwards,” to run away from what he sees.

He continues: “Es schwächt mich etwas von oben. Ich habe keinen Halt mehr hinter den Augen. Der Raum wogt so endlos; einst floß er doch auf eine Stelle. Zerfallen ist Rinde, die mich trug” (III: 32)<sup>143</sup>. Rönne no longer has a “Halt” behind his eyes: what he takes in of the world does not enter a fixed mental structure, nor does it cease; visual perception (not to mention the voices he hears) amounts to an infinite and ceaseless disorientation. This is an echo of Worringer’s concept of “ungeheure geistige Raumscheu” or spiritual agoraphobia, in which Rönne would be either the primitive or the Gothic man. If there is anything “expressive” or “Gothic”

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<sup>143</sup> A strikingly similar formulation of exposed, vulnerable eyes occurs in Rilke’s *Malte*: “[. . .] und ich selbst, ja, mein Gott, ich habe kein Dach über mir und es regnet mir in die Augen” (6: 747) [“and as for myself, dear God, I don’t have a roof over my head and it is raining into my eyes” (28)]. And in a further formulation of this abstraction from space, Rönne remarks, “Er sei keinem Ding mehr gegenüber; er habe keine Macht mehr über dem Raum, äußerte er einmal” (III: 33)

about Benn's prose, it would be in the following two aspects: (1) Rönne's perception of the outside world is one of chaos, caprice and threat, exactly like the worldview that Worringer imputes to primitive and Gothic man. And like the Gothic man (and *unlike* the primitive), Rönne is not merely in need of "abstraction," for as we have seen in his medical guise, he is already quite abstracted from "reality." This abstraction is but a further source of *Raumscheu*; it does not lead to redemption from the chaos, but only to another manifestation of it. Just as Worringer's Gothic man oscillates between a need for empathetic abstraction and a need for abstract empathy (the contradiction that Worringer names "expressive" and attributes to "non-organic life"), we can assume that Rönne makes a similar oscillation. If one pole of that oscillation is the perception of the outside world as chaos, a perception that threatens to destroy the coherence of the perceiver, then the other pole would be the impossible perception of the self as chaos from the outside perspective of the fixity of mechanical and physiological laws. Benn/Rönne is the fusion of both, and that fusion is constituted only in the delirium of writing.

(2) Just as Worringer discusses the flattening of the three dimensional perception of an object onto a plane (i.e. the production of haptic space) as a procedure that liberates the otherwise closed material essence of the object, so does the text's shifting-back-and-forth of grammatical person indicate a kind of "liberation" of perspective, of psychology, of language. Just as the "ich" falls apart and reveals what is *primary* (in this case, the brain), so do conventional or traditional forms of representation in language fall apart – or need to be broken apart – to reveal the primary syntax underneath, the brain-stem of language, the non-organic life of language, so to speak. This would be some primary core of language (analogous to the "closed material individuality" of the object of representation in Riegl and Worringer), which, as we have seen, Benn calls "das Primäre," "das Wort," "Satzbau" and



“primäre Setzung.” Delirious writing is the stylistic line that, like Worringer’s Gothic line (which brings surface and depth into contact both with each other and the eye—and body—of the spectator), brings the surface of written language into contact with the depth of its primal power *and* with the eye and non-cerebral body of its reader.

Rönne tells us that, once upon a time, that endless flux of perception came to a point that was presumably where a unified coherent ego used to be. Now the frame, the skin, the bark of that ego has fallen to pieces. In a reversal of the Freudian formula, “Wo es war, soll ich werden,” for Rönne a formless, contentless “es” has assumed or resumed the place where “ich” was. “*Es schwächt mich etwas von oben.*” The vanishing point of the self that used to organize or perspectivize space has itself vanished, and Rönne is plunged into a haptic space, not an optical one.<sup>144</sup>

Hence the insistence on *hands* in the immediately following passages. Since eyes are no longer a reliable organ of perception, hands will have to suffice. “Oft, wenn er von solchen Gängen in sein Zimmer zurückgekehrt war, drehte er seine Hände hin und her und sah sie an” (III: 32). The gesture of a nervous, preoccupied person, namely pacing back and forth,<sup>145</sup> is here replaced by the turning back and forth of his hands, to which Rönne turns his gaze as if they could provide a better grasp on the outside world, or on himself, than his eyes.

Und einmal beobachtete eine Schwester, wie er sie berieselte oder vielmehr, wie er über sie hinging, als prüfe er ihre Luft, und wie er dann die leicht gebeugten Handflächen, nach oben offen, an den kleinen Fingern zusammenlegte, um sie dann einander zu und ab zu bewegen, als brähe er eine große, weiche Frucht auf oder als böge er etwas auseinander. (III: 32)

A nurse observes Rönne, who, in passing her by and smelling her rather than greeting her, makes another curious, repetitive, searching or imploring gesture with his hands,

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<sup>144</sup> In “Die Reise”: “Er blätterte das Entgegenkommende behutsam auseinander mit seinen tastenden, an der Spitze leicht ermüdbaren Augen” (III: 46)

<sup>145</sup> See the scene of delirium in the Salpêtrière hospital in *Malte* in Chapter 3.

moving his upturned palms back and forth as if he were breaking open a large fruit or splitting something apart.

Sie erzählte es den anderen Schwestern; aber niemand wußte, was es zu bedeuten habe. Bis es sich ereignete, daß in der Anstalt ein größeres Tier geschlachtet wurde. Rönne kam scheinbar zufällig herbei, als der Kopf aufgeschlagen wurde, nahm den Inhalt in die Hände und bog die beiden Hälften auseinander. (III: 32)

Rönne obsessively anticipates the gesture of the pulling-apart of the contents of the animal's skull, as if he were acting out the gesture *before* the event took place, or as if the animal's brain became in that instant merely a literal substitute for some other imaginary brain (his own?) that he had long been engaged in dissecting. Rönne doesn't contemplate this gesture as an idea and afterwards he doesn't remember it or return to it in his thoughts; rather he acts it out, performs it, and the outward gesture of his hands replaces the inward gesture of thinking. According to the way Rönne superimposes—or else radically separates, and indeed they somehow have the same effect—past, present and future, inside and outside, perception and memory and imagination, we see that if something is on his mind, then it is also in his hands, and if those hands are, from the first page onwards, to be associated with writing, then this passage finally brings the problem of writing into contact with the titular organ of the text.

## Part II: Verbal Scalpels and the Furrows of the Brain

But that titular organ is not yet named, and Rönne's language here is elusive, suggestive, and deferring. Rönne does not take the brains of the animal in his hands, rather only the "content" of the cracked-open skull, separating the two halves, breaking them open, breaking them apart. The word "content," however, turns the passage toward the abstract, interrupting the brutal, blank literalness of the sentence and calling forth content's abstract partner: *form*. What Rönne does in the gesture of

his hands (necessarily also the gesture of his writing) is to dissect, expose, even destroy “content,” the content of bodies, of selves (including his own), of narration and of language: the pulling-apart of content by (verbal) form. Words thus function implicitly as a kind of scalpel for Rönne, who cannot abide the fixity of meaning, who is compelled to use his hands, his eyes and his writing to expose the hidden or repressed “content” of reality, even if it means dissolving that “content” into utter chaos.<sup>146</sup> It is precisely that scalpel-function of poetic form that Benn will later call “das Primäre,” the primary, originary or radical use of language that refuses all convention and self-evidence down to the smallest linguistic unit, the *word*, and builds something new that is both beyond and before “reality,” “Ich” and grammar, both the *Urschicht* and the *Stil der Zukunft*.

But as Rönne’s obsessively repetitive gesture suggests, that mystical breakthrough or summoning or creation of the primary is not permanent, nor does the threat of chaos or meaninglessness ever yield. Rather it is a constant, ceaseless problem. At the end of the text in a “speech” to the director of the hospital (now returned, we are more or less given to understand, because of Rönne’s inability to function as a physician):

Rönne aber sagte: sehen Sie, in diesen meinen Händen hielt ich sie, hundert oder tausend Stück; manche waren weich, manche waren hart, alle sehr zerfließlich; Männer, Weiber, mürbe und voll Blut. Nun halte ich immer mein eigenes in meinen Händen und muß immer darnach forschen, was mit mir möglich sei. (III: 34)

The text again refuses to name that crucial body part, thereby refusing to name itself.

The emphasis remains on hands and gesture; the content doesn’t really matter because it is *only* matter. In any case, of all the matter or “content” that Rönne held in his

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<sup>146</sup> Carl Einstein uses exactly the same metaphor to describe Benn’s “Hauptworte” in his 1927 review of Benn’s *Gesammelte Gedichte*: “[Benns Worte] sind weit wie Wolken und enthalten, man könnte sagen apriorisch, den Wechsel: die möglichen Nuancen und Färbungen; geistig aber sind sie präzise wie *Skalpelle des Zerebrums*. [. . .] Diese Substantive sind Mittel der Abkürzung: sie erläutern nicht, sondern geben den Umriß, woein simultan die Stufungen der Einzelergebnisse sich sammeln und subsummieren” (cited in Roland, 253 n 46, emphasis added JD).

hands (and for him, to hold is the same as to rip apart), whether it was a hundred or a thousand, hard or soft, male or female, they are all countless and the same and equally decomposable, perishable, dissectible, exposable, even and especially the “content” of his own skull, which he *always* holds in his hands, *constantly* researching into the limits of his possibility.

It may not be farfetched to link *forschen* with *furchen* (to furrow a field); the *Furchen*<sup>147</sup> that traverse the brain in the language of medical science; and the same “furrows” of writing from the old metaphor of boustrophedonic writing that survives in the etymologies of certain modern European words for reading as harvesting or gathering from the furrow (German *lesen*, French *lire* from Latin *lira*, furrow). Writing for Rönne would be the simultaneous *forschen* of his self and the *furchen* of his brain, the literal and figural writing of his brain, some primal digging or tracing of form into chaos that helps explain the strange image of writing as “unterwühlen” from the first page. Writing would then be the confrontation (*Auseinandersetzung*, *Auseinanderbeugung*) that interposes itself between an “ich” that must be exposed and a primal chaos that must be kept at bay. Writing would then be the delirious oscillation between the two extremes, between the rigidity and artificiality of given forms and the flux of pure formlessness—delirious writing would be the writing both inside and outside the furrows. Benn’s own commentary on his Rönne narratives from *Doppelleben* speaks to this precarious oscillation, to its possibility and its limit. He writes:

An das Primäre können diese Dinge mit Zeitcharakter doch nicht anknüpfen, und wiederum die Voraussetzungen für Historisches besaß er [Rönne] nach Erfahrung und Anlage nicht. Alles schwebte also aneinander vorbei und ermüdete nur mit seinen Gewalten. Es mußte also etwas Drittes eintreten, eine Vermischung, und der strebte er

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<sup>147</sup> In *Malte*, Rilke uses the phrase, “solche Furchen im Gehirne” to describe the “zähe Unvergänglichkeit” of the “Existenz des Entsetzlichen” as literal/metaphorical furrows traced on the human brain. (6: 776-8)

unaufhörlich zu, etwas, was gleichzeitig eine Aufhebung war und eine Verschmelzung, aber das gab es nur für Momente, in Fallkrisen, von Durchbruchcharakter, und das war immer der Vernichtung nahe. Aber nicht immer war man dazu fähig, und so sehen wir ihn nach diesem tastenden Vorstoß in das Vage zu einer ungünstigen Stunde, vormittags, zurückschrecken, sich selbst entfliehen und zunächst noch einmal sich der Norm versichern. (IV: 166-7)

The reference here is to a scene from another Rönne novella, “Die Reise,” in which a group of Rönne’s colleagues discuss, over lunch, the charms of eating avocados.

Rönne, at a loss to participate in the conversation, full of panic and disgust, finally musters a bland comment and “triumphantly” joins the ranks of the other gentlemen who know how to balance work and casual conversation.<sup>148</sup> Rönne can neither extricate himself from the banal conversation, nor find inner access to the rush of aesthetic sensation; he remains trapped in the ready-made *ich* of everyday bourgeois life. Returning to the title story of *Gehirne*, we encounter a similar lapse:

[W]enn er sich gesprächsweise zu dem Verwalter oder der Oberin über irgendeinen Gegenstand äußern sollte, wenn er fühlte, jetzt sei es daran, eine Äußerung seinerseits dem in Frage stehenden Gegenstand zukommen zu lassen, brach er förmlich zusammen. Was solle man denn zu einem Geschehen sagen? (III: 32)

That “förmlich” might mean something like “completely” or “utterly,” but given that we just encountered the word “Inhalt” a few lines earlier, it also might refer to the failure of *form* to realize itself, to take over. In such moments of artistic impotence, Rönne is left at best with a question, posed perhaps by the same “more distant” voice we heard earlier: “Was solle man denn zu einem Geschehen sagen?” (III: 32) The text is in fact full of such questions, posed by an impersonal voice (sometime in *Konjunktiv I*, as if to suggest that the voice is Rönne’s through *erlebte Rede*, sometimes narrated directly – although I have already suggested there is hardly a distinction between the two), blank imprecations of existential dread and alienation (not to mention bourgeois

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<sup>148</sup> In this retreat into the habits and patterns of everyday speech and everyday bourgeois life, Rönne speaks and acts as *das Man* would act. Benn anticipates (here satirically) the anxious withdrawal from authentic, historical existence that Martin Heidegger will call *das Man* in *Sein und Zeit* (1928), §27. (18<sup>th</sup> Edition. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2001.)

ennui): “Als ich anfing, blieb es bei mir?” (III: 29); “Hätte ich doch gelogen, als ich zu diesem sagte: Glück auf!” (III: 31); “Wo bin ich hingekommen? Wo bin ich?” (III: 31); “Was solle man denn zu einem Geschehen sagen?”; “Wohin solle man sich dann sagen?” (III: 33); and finally, most important for our reading, for what we have on the brain, so to speak: “Wenn die Geburtszange hier ein bisschen tiefer in die Schläfe gedrückt hätte. . . ? Wenn man mich immer über eine bestimmte Stelle des Kopfes geschlagen hätte. . . ? Was ist es denn mit den Gehirnen?” (III: 34).

As if in answer to this question, Rönne concludes his speech with a startling sequence or montage or words:

Ich wollte immer auffliegen wie ein Vogel aus der Schlucht; nun lebe ich außen im Kristall. Aber nun geben Sie mir bitte den Weg frei, ich schwinge wieder – ich war so müde – auf Flügeln geht dieser Gang – mit meinem blauen Anemonenschwert – in Mittagsturz des Lichts – in Trümmern des Südens – in zerfallendem Gewölk – Zerstäubungen der Stirne – Entschweifungen der Schläfe. (III: 34)

The afore-mentioned analogy to painting is to be established through a theory of haptic vision on the one hand, and through the verbal experiment of “syntax” on the other. Haptic space is tactile, space flattened, space organized around touching, in which the eye has a touching function, in which the hand sees the essence of things. To represent this space is destructive and violent (in Worringer and Riegl): it is an oppression or suppression, it is a flattening, it is an approximal, asymptotal approach at something ever-receding that must be violently forced into view/grasp. It is a restructuring of the visual world to release something that that world otherwise imprisons. Thus, in verbal poetic terms, the unexpected rush of condensed language is the end of Rönne’s brain, i.e. his goal, his completion, and his breakdown. Rönne wanders deliriously along this end-line, this border of inside and outside, literal and metaphorical, his skull cracked open, his hands trying to come to grips with the very content that his words, both methodical and ecstatic, have exposed. Benn’s

neologisms, his “montage,” his new syntax, join together words not as words, but as elements of syntax, words that loosen and join (“schwer erklärbare Macht des Wortes, das löst und fügt” [III: 133]), a syntax that is unstable, in which falling apart and putting together are one and the same. The words are new: they are unseen, unheard-of, and the eye must pass over them slowly, reading each part, as if touching each part, to see what the whole might be. The reading process become tactile, haptic, delirious, just like Benn’s writing process, in its constant gripping, searching, grasping-after and prying-apart of meaning and structure. And as we have already seen, Benn’s *Epilog und lyrisches Ich* likens the process of writing/reading to the life of a single-celled creature with *Flimmerhaare*, grasping words as sustenance in a kind of primal reading. Writing/reading amounts to a grasping after words that differentiate themselves from the sea of banality and convention, and the writer/reader is the one who gathers these words and writes them down, always in danger of collapsing into that chaotic sea, or else finding nothing at all.

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